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Leadership and Oversight in British Methodism - whither episcopate?

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**Leadership and Oversight in British Methodism -
whither episcopate?**

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**Thesis submitted for the Doctorate in
Theology and Ministry**

King's College, London

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Abstract

The dissertation has at its heart the key question of whether the current form of episcopate - i.e. leadership and oversight structures - within British Methodism continue to be appropriate in the contemporary church, or whether the Church is held by past models which are no longer effective.

This question is explored through three distinct sections:

- historical research examines the origins of leadership structures within Methodism in Britain. These structures are compared with those which developed contemporaneously in the United States, and which were different in form. This section then traces the development of British Methodism's leadership structures up to the present day, notes changes which have taken place, and the debates over episcopacy.
- Empirical research forms the second part of the thesis. Quantitative research utilising congregational questionnaires are used to explore the views of lay Methodists on issues relating to leadership, such as their knowledge of those in positions of leadership within the Church, their views regarding the influence of structures upon their worshipping lives at local church level, and the possibility of episcopacy being introduced. A qualitative approach is used in detailed interviews carried out with Methodist presbyters in key leadership roles. The interviews are wide-ranging in their exploration of current models of leadership, including areas where significant change might be desirable.
- Proposals for change from a range of sources are then considered. These include the views of contemporary writers on Methodism, and different modes of church leadership in other denominations as well as within the newly formed Methodist Church in the Gambia. It is argued that history and

context are key elements within the formation of church leadership, and critical when change is considered.

The research leads into a final section which offers proposals for the development of leadership within contemporary British Methodism both at local (Circuit), and national (Connexional) level. These proposals include consideration being given to the possible introduction of an episcopate as a means of offering an improved system of leadership for the Methodist people.

Introduction - Episcopate and Episcopacy

Preface

The focus of this dissertation is primarily upon the British Methodist Church, and how oversight and leadership are exercised locally and nationally. It is believed that this is a key area for research within British Methodism as it comes at a time when, as this study will show, questions are being asked about how effectively traditional Methodist structures of leadership are functioning within the contemporary Church.

Such questions include the nature of the independence and inter-dependence of local churches on other Methodist structures, the role of the Methodist Conference as the key location for decision-making, and the way in which central leadership is described and exercised. In addition, conversations over greater unity within the last fifty years, especially with the United Reformed Church and the Church of England, have led to the need for consideration to be given to other forms of leadership - including the introduction of bishops - and this has contributed to a wealth of reports into church oversight.

At a personal level, my Ministerial Focussed Study as part of the King's College DThMin course took as its subject leadership within Methodist Circuits. The study raised concerns over the way in which local churches operated in connexion with other Methodist structures. The MFS led me to my desire to undertake a wider examination of Methodist leadership as questions were raised about the nature of a Connexional¹ church at a time when greater localisation was taking place.

¹ 'Connexional' refers to the way in which different structures within Methodism are inter-related, with local churches being part of the national church rather than having their own independence. This concept will be explored in greater detail within the study.

In addition, my ministry as a Superintendent Minister within two different Circuits, has led to an increasing interest in how the Church operates at a Connexional level, and what the relationship is between localised church-life, and the Connexion. A sense of divide has appeared to be present, and in part this dissertation is to consider whether this perception is a reality, and what might assist an improved picture of leadership and oversight within British Methodism.

The dissertation has at its heart the question of whether the current form of episcopate - i.e. leadership and oversight structures - within British Methodism continue to be appropriate in the contemporary church, or whether the Church is being held by past models which are no longer effective.

In order that this question can be explored, the historical legacy that has given rise to the Methodist structures that are now in place will be examined, and will include reference to terms such as 'episcopate' or 'episcopate'² and 'episcopacy'. It is therefore important to establish the meaning and history of these terms, as well as to place debates over the structures, location and nature of leadership within Methodism, in the context of the history of the wider church.

This introduction, therefore, offers a brief account of the development of leadership and oversight within the early Church, thus providing a context in which episcopate and episcopacy might be understood when an examination of Methodist leadership is offered.

² Both spellings are encountered in the literature, and this thesis retains the variant spellings of the term found in the various sources and documents consulted in writing the dissertation.

The origins of Church leadership

The New Testament offers some indication of the means by which ministry within the new Christian communities developed, and the titles or descriptors which were used in relation to those who were involved in leadership. These are to found both within the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles.

In Jerusalem under the leadership of Peter and the other Apostles, the presence of church *elders* is reported. For example, in Acts 15 as Paul and Barnabas visit the Christians in Jerusalem, Luke notes that they were “welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.” (Acts 15:4)³. It may be concluded, therefore, that in Jerusalem where the immediate disciples of Christ were based, their leadership was supplemented by others in positions of seniority.

Commentators on this period draw attention to similarities between the nature of, and terminology for, this type of leadership, with the traditional synagogue structure which would have been so familiar to the Jerusalem disciples. Stuart Hall⁴, for example, notes that, “the word ‘elder’ or ‘presbyter’ could be used...of any senior person, but already denoted in Jewish synagogues the older males who formed a governing body.”.

Together with the term ‘elder’, there are references within the New Testament to ‘deacons’ and ‘bishops’ as being present within the church in different locations. In St Paul’s first letter to the Church in Philippi, for example, he begins with the greeting, “to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons” (Philippians 1:1). Bishops and deacons are also referred to elsewhere in the epistles. In 1 Timothy, the author outlines the qualities that are expected from those occupying these leadership roles, and in Romans 16:1

³ All Biblical quotations from the New Revised Standard Version

⁴ Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the the Early Church*, 31.

Paul refers to Phoebe as a “deacon of the church at Cenchreae”, thus suggesting a role for women as deacons within the church.

Exactly what the meaning of these descriptors was in terms of the role being undertaken, is more difficult to ascertain, and to some extent they may have had a degree of interchangeability about them. In Acts ⁵, for example, Paul is said to have summoned the *elders* of the church to meet with him, and he then refers to their calling as “*overseers*”⁶ to shepherd the church of God”⁷.

In congregations outside Jerusalem which were formed through the travelling of the apostles, the local community needed to establish leadership in its own locality. Again, it is impossible to ascertain how the roles referred to in the epistles and Acts were actually exercised in practice⁸, but what is clear is that local communities of believers needed to have both leadership and oversight within their congregations, and such was offered by those referred to as elders or overseers⁹.

There are, therefore, three titles or descriptors present for those who are working within the church at this early stage, even though the attribution of exact roles is far from easy. The descriptor - bishop, is given as *episkopos* in Greek meaning “one who oversees” or “one who inspects”; deacon is from *diakonos* meaning “waiter” or “servant”; and elder in Greek is “*presbyteros*”.

⁵ Acts 20:17

⁶ deriving from the plural of *episkopos*, translated as overseer or bishop. My italics.

⁷ Acts 20:28

⁸ In relation to letters attributed to Paul, for example, Edwin Freed notes that “Perhaps Paul is referring to a group of leaders and their helpers that was influential in the collection of funds for the church in Jerusalem and for him.” Freed, *The New Testament - a critical introduction*, 293

⁹ See, for example, the detailed account of the development of leadership within the early church by Francis Sullivan who notes “..by the 80’s each local church, including those of the Pauline tradition, had a group of leaders who they called either elders or overseers”. He goes on to stress the importance faced by the co-workers of the apostles in selecting the right people for these tasks. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of Episcopacy*, 226.

In the century following the death of the apostles, localised ministry developed. Texts from that period provide information regarding the nature of that ministry, and the titles used within the New Testament continue to be present within the developing early Church. Differences in usage, however, emerge according to the location of the Church and the authorship of the document being considered.

One of the earliest of these documents was attributed to Clement who was Bishop of Rome at the end of the first century AD. At the time of his writing, the Church in Corinth continued to experience divisions as it had done during the era of St Paul. Clement writes to the Corinthians around 95 A.D., in part as a response to those divisions which had included younger Christians opposing their more senior appointed leaders. In a letter attributed to him, Clement refers to the Apostles having "...appointed their first-fruits (having perceived them by the Spirit) to be bishops and deacons of them that should believe..."¹⁰. In addition, reference is made in his writings to bishops and presbyters, but without distinguishing any difference in role which might have existed. Indeed, commentators on this period suggest that the titles may have been interchangeable¹¹.

The episcopal nature of the bishop's position within the Church as is understood today, does not appear to have been present at the time of Clement, but nevertheless seems to have developed quickly especially in locations such as Antioch. By the time of Ignatius in the early years of the second century, the

¹⁰ Clement of Rome Epistle to the Corinthians in Bettenson (ed), *Documents of the Christian Church*, 88-89

¹¹ See for example Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 19. Similarly, Francis Sullivan notes Irenaeus's use of the term presbyter when referring to bishops. In this, Sullivan adds support to the view that bishops were members of a college of presbyters, but had particular skills in leading and teaching which made them the outstanding members of the college - Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of Episcopacy*, 153.

Other noted works in this area such as Stevenson and Frend (eds), *A New Eusebius*, document this period and provides a companion work to that of Stuart Hall referred to earlier.

Church in Antioch appears to have adopted “monarchical bishops” who exercised particular and significant authority. In his letter to the Smyrneans around 112 A.D., Ignatius wrote, “Let no man perform anything pertaining to the church without the bishop.”¹², thus indicating the key role of the bishop in the ordering of liturgy, and in the general overseeing or inspection of the congregation.

In his classic work on the early church, Henry Chadwick notes that -

“The elevation of the episcopate into an order standing above the presbyterate...was taking place in the period when apostolic authority was going or gone.”¹³.

In part this move enabled local churches to define their own leadership, but also to join with other Christian communities in providing a coherent structure of authoritative proclamation to counter teaching perceived as heretical - notably gnosticism.

The three-fold order of ministry - bishop, presbyter and deacon - appeared to be the norm by around 200 A.D. although as Chadwick notes,

“The exact history of this transition within two generations from apostles, prophets and teachers¹⁴ to to bishop, presbyters and deacons is shrouded in obscurity...”¹⁵

Diarmaid MacCulloch¹⁶ in his account of the development of ministry in this period concludes that

¹² Bettenson (ed), *Documents of the Christian Church*, 90

¹³ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 50

¹⁴ These first three titles refer to Paul’s list of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:28

¹⁵ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 46.

¹⁶ MacCulloch, *Groundwork of Christian History*, 51.

“...by the end of the second century the pattern set by the discussion of apostolic succession in Clement and of monarchical episcopacy in Ignatius had taken over the whole Christian world.”¹⁷

Episcopate - the oversight of church congregations which was not necessarily through the office of bishop, was therefore the usual pattern whilst the Apostles were alive, and in the immediate period after their deaths. Oversight by a college of presbyters from whom in some locations bishops emerged, appears to have been one of the patterns of ministry in operation. Collegial episcopate was then followed by a model of episcopacy - the leadership, oversight and / or governance of the Church by bishops - which is referred to as monarchical episcopacy due to the level of authority placed into the hands of the episcopate.

It is suggested in this short introduction that such a development was not as a result of fulfilling Gospel teachings, but more to do with church order, the need to resist ‘false teachings’, and the emergence of skilled teachers and leaders from amongst the presbyteral college. These factors led to the taking on of additional episcopal responsibility. It might be argued that this structure was not the only structure which the Church could have utilised, and when attention is turned to later denominational emergence in Britain some fifteen hundred years later, it can be seen that other structures of episcopate were indeed adopted in other contexts.

In this, emerging denominations developed their own understanding of how leadership within the church could or should be exercised, especially within the context of their time. What was clearly apparent was that episcopate - i.e. the exercising of oversight - could exist within a church through personal, collegial and corporate leadership, without the necessity of episcopacy within an

¹⁷ MacCulloch, *Groundwork of Christian History*, 55.

episcopate - i.e. the presence of those who are appointed or ordained as Bishops.

MacCulloch, writing in “Groundwork of Christian History”¹⁸ primarily for a Methodist audience, draws an interesting comparison in the context of this dissertation between the developing structures within the early Church, and those which emerged within the Methodist movement of the eighteenth century. As was the case in the early church, Methodism in its early form relied upon travelling preachers - notably John Wesley himself - together with the development of local congregations.

Methodism, like the early Church, therefore needed to hold in balance the authority of those appointed by Wesley to visit and preach, together with those who were able to establish localised leadership within the developing Methodist societies. Methodism also needed to establish its doctrines as a movement, and faced challenges from those who did not hold with those which were espoused by Wesley. Therefore oversight, inspection, and leadership, were also part of the picture of the developing Methodist movement.

Additionally, the leadership of John Wesley, which might not unfairly be described as monarchical episcopacy in all but name, then gave way to a different form of episcopate following his death. This move away from the concept of one strong leader leading the Church was intentionally taken as will be seen later. The post-Wesley Methodist Church, therefore, embraced episcopate, but not episcopacy. In other words, at different levels within the Church, oversight and leadership was offered and exercised without the introduction of bishops as part of the structure of the Church.

¹⁸ a textbook produced for the Methodist publishers Epworth

The research question and method of investigation

This dissertation is in part concerned with how the development of Methodist leadership structures took place, and the tensions between central - or connexional - leadership, and the autonomy of local congregations.

At its heart, the dissertation will address the question of how episcopate is exercised within the contemporary Methodist Church, and whether the historical and present context have shaped structures which operate well, or whether alternatives should be considered. To assist this enquiry, the following areas of research will be utilised;

- an historical account of British Methodism as an eighteenth century movement, and its development into a Church with structured leadership and oversight
- a comparison with the parallel development of Methodism in the newly independent eighteenth century America
- a consideration of contemporary debates and changes within Methodist structures
- a sampling of the views of Methodist congregations through quantitative research
- interviews with a sample of Methodist presbyteral ministers engaged in oversight and leadership through qualitative research
- ecumenical comparisons and considerations

It is expected that this analysis will provide a picture of the history and context for contemporary Methodist episcopate.

In addressing issues of oversight and leadership, the dissertation will explore the structures of Methodism in their varied forms, and will note that episcopate is exercised individually, collegially and communally, without the presence of an episcopate. Whilst the possible introduction of bishops into British

Methodism is not the only issue within the study, the question will be asked whether the reluctance of the Church to embrace personal episcopate following the death of John Wesley, has been a help or hindrance to the contemporary Church in its ministry and mission. Finally, the study will look at proposals for changes in the nature of episcopate, including the possible introduction of episcopacy.

Chapter 1 Methodism - origins, authority, and the genesis of separation

The eighteenth century was a time of significant religious change in Britain. During the first half of the century the movement termed the 'evangelical revival' was instrumental in the Christian conversion of large numbers of people, many of whom would normally be considered as being outside the normal influence of the established Church¹⁹. Within this revival, the movement known as Methodism had a significant place in terms of its impact at the time, and the longevity of its effect upon the ecclesiological climate not only within Britain, but in many other countries also²⁰.

As is well-documented, Methodism was founded by the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, who were ordained Anglicans, and who retained a love for the Church into which they were ordained even till the end of their lives. As late, for example, as 1788, in a letter to Henry Moore three years before his death, Wesley asserted, "I am a Church of England man....in the Church of England I will live and die unless I am thrust out".²¹ As many authors have pointed out, and as Garth Lean in his biography of Wesley puts it, "Wesley had in mind his original aim of founding not a church, but societies within the Church"²²

This intention of creating and nurturing a movement, rather than a church, is important when the structures and oversight of that movement are considered. In the main, the need for organisational development occurred as the

¹⁹ The 'unpromising' climate for revival is described by authors such as David Hempton who includes "the existence of new proto-industrial populations wild and free from religion" amongst his list of factors which might have worked against Christian renewal. Hempton, *Methodism Empire of the Spirit*, 13.

²⁰ In his account of the eighteenth century revival, G. M. Ditchfield summarises the coming together of aspects of Methodism with the religious and social climate of the time which encouraged growth. These not only included Wesley's initiatives, but also the willingness of Methodism to engage with folk-culture, its appreciation of science as part of the wonder of creation, and its alignment with the supernatural beliefs of the people of that age. Ditchfield *The Evangelical Revival*.

²¹ Telford (ed) *The Letters of the Rev John Wesley A.M.* volume VIII, 52.

²² Lean, *John Wesley Anglican*, 107

movement grew, and was thus evolutionary in nature, rather than coming together as a 'grand plan' designed from the outset by John Wesley. As will be seen in the next chapter, this was rather different to the establishment of the Methodist Church in America after independence. The leadership required in the two situations was to be different in nature, as was the terminology used for that leadership.

As Methodism grew, the structures that were introduced by John Wesley to oversee the new phenomenon increasingly led in a direction towards a separated denomination, rather than, as was his stated desire, a movement within the Church. Wesley's pragmatic, and at times visionary, organisational skills would gradually give birth to structures which enabled a national movement, with accompanying local and national mechanisms of oversight, to evolve. These structures would not only seek to meet the needs of individual societies, but would also provide the means by which individual fellowships were connected together one with another, through a leadership which was under Wesley's authority, and continues to be termed Connexionalism.

It is of credit to the founder of Methodism, that many of the structures which were introduced retain their influence, names, and importance within contemporary Methodism. Some of these structures will be explored in a little detail so that their importance can be outlined.

Societies, Classes and Circuits

Bristol was a key location for the growth of Methodism, and it was here that the first Methodist societies developed. They were formed from groups of people who met together for Christian worship and learning, and were not intended to be churches. Their members were instructed to continue to attend the Parish Church for Holy Communion, and their meetings took place at times - such as Sunday early-morning or evening, or on a weekday - which avoided clashes with local Church of England services.

The first Methodist building was established in Bristol with the foundation stone to the 'New Room' being laid on May 12th 1739. It was "built as a place to expound the Scriptures to the Societies"²³, and was used to accommodate two of the Bristol societies which became the first to be under Wesley's control²⁴.

Services within the societies consisted of preaching, prayers and hymn-singing, and other meetings for prayer also took place. Lay leadership was the norm, and the informality of the meetings contrasted with the liturgy of the Anglican Church. Particular forms of worship - for example, love-feasts, watch-night services at New Year, and the annual Covenant service - became part of the practice of Methodist societies.

Within the societies themselves, groups of twelve members met in classes, which focussed upon the development of Christian understanding, Bible Study and prayer. In addition, the classes provided the means by which funds could be raised, new members welcomed within a more informal grouping, and the societies organised.

The pyramidal structure present within Methodism over the centuries began at an early stage in the movement's development. Therefore, just as the societies were formed from classes, so the societies in their turn were formed into Circuits where they were grouped into geographical areas. Within these Circuits - also called rounds - Wesley appointed preachers to lead the societies and nurture their faith. These were known as "Helpers", but in 1749, Wesley termed a smaller group of senior, ordained "Helpers" as "Assistants" who had oversight of the Circuits. These were the forerunners of the Superintendents - a term that became used after Wesley's death.

²³ taken from the 'New Room' website - <http://www.newroombristol.org.uk/History>

²⁴ Barrie Tabraham quotes from unpublished research by Rupert Davies in relation to the New Room "It was on 11 July 1739, in the presence of Whitefield and Wesley, that the first distinctively Methodist Society was born..." Tabraham, *The Making of Methodism*, 46

Frank Baker²⁵ makes the point that whilst local people were appointed as band-leaders and class-leaders, they lacked authority. Instead this was vested in the Helpers or Assistants by Wesley. Baker notes in relation to local leaders that they, "...simply discharged administrative duties under the assistant." A system was therefore developing in which Wesley's authority was present in his absence through those whom he appointed. Furthermore, local societies were far from being independent entities and were instead part of an hierarchical structure.

Wesley's non-stop travelling within and beyond Britain, set the model which was expected from his Assistants who were to travel around their Circuits in a similar way. In the absence of ordained ministers, the Assistants were responsible for the oversight of the societies and thus provided a consistency between the different areas of the country. Assistants were also itinerant, in that they did not remain within the same Circuit for long. Initially it appears that they were expected to move every month, and by the 1750's this had become an annual move.

John Kent in his consideration of the life of these itinerant Assistants, suggests that such a ministry was not necessarily beneficial to those who were undertaking the task. He comments;

"This steady rotation through wide tracts of the country from preaching-place to preaching-place limited their social skills. They became locked into a biblical culture of their own, isolated men who depended on one another."²⁶

It is difficult to ascertain the veracity of this, but as time passed localised as well as itinerant ministry was required.

It may be recalled from the comments in the Introduction with reference to the early Church, that localised structures were in time needed as travelling

²⁵ Baker, "The People called Methodist: 3. Polity", 225.

²⁶ John Kent, *Wesley and the Wesleyans. Religion in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, 93

Apostles and others ceased in their journeying, and that Diarmuid MacCulloch²⁷ likened this to the situation in early Methodism. Significantly, the structures introduced by Wesley at local level - notably Circuits, Assistants (Superintendents), and itinerancy, continued to be key elements within Methodism during the following centuries, and are of importance still in the contemporary British Methodist Church.

It is of at least passing interest to note that classes - the gatherings of members of the local societies into smaller groups, which were so important for the nurturing of Christian discipleship, have largely disappeared from contemporary Methodism, to be replaced by Pastoral Classes which are more for the pastoral care of members, than for the nurturing of faith. This has occurred at the same time as other denominations have discovered the importance of house-groups and cell-churches, which perform a similar function to Wesley's classes. At one level, at least, contemporary Methodism would appear to have discarded a means of growth which other churches have discovered as being of great value.

The pyramidal structure of Methodism which Wesley introduced, ensured that local societies were to be a part of something greater, and that in their leadership and teaching, his influence would continue to be felt. His own remarkable travelling around the country and beyond, to visit the various societies not only reinforced the notion of a travelling, itinerant leadership, but was a further means by which those societies could be linked to him, and through him, to each other.

Frank Baker, in his chapter on the development of Methodist structures during Wesley's lifetime in "A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain" provides an interesting, and in the context of this study highly relevant, summary statement regarding the location of oversight, or episcopate:

²⁷ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Groundwork of Christian History*.

“In the Assistants and Superintendents has resided the day-to-day episcopate or authority in Methodism, but always subject to the ultimate episcopate of Wesley or (after his death) the Conference”²⁸.

The dual location of episcopate with Superintendents and with the Conference, is a theme which will be explored in detail later in study within the context of contemporary Methodism, with the origins of the Conference receiving comment in the following section.

Conference, Connexion and moves towards separation

At national level, in order for Wesley to consult with others about the future direction of the movement, annual conferences were called, the first taking place in 1744. This first meeting included five clergy, and four laymen who met with Wesley. The practice of meeting in conference became an annual occurrence, and the numbers attending grew in subsequent years.

Whilst the intention of the Conference was for Wesley to receive advice on his administration of the societies, with such guidance being offered on the basis of a majority view, Wesley took a characteristically leading role during the meetings. Frank Baker notes that “never during his lifetime was there a straightforward government by a majority vote”²⁹ In similar vein, Barrie Tabraham noted that Wesley,

“chaired the meetings, put the questions and took the minutes, it was clear who was in control! The remark made by Pawson, one of his faithful supporters, that ‘even the Pope himself never acted a part such as this’ was an exaggeration, but even Wesley himself admitted to being somewhat autocratic.”³⁰

²⁸ Baker, “The People called Methodist: 3. Polity”, 231.

²⁹ Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 107.

³⁰ Tabraham, *The Making of Methodism*, 47

The annual Conferences were important in the development of Methodism as a coherent, national movement rather than a series of localised revivals run by local leaders in a manner of their choosing. Therefore, the Conferences dealt with matters such as doctrinal issues in relation to a Methodist understanding of salvation, and the codification of the theological emphases which Methodist preachers were expected to follow.

The 1744 Conference affirmed the intention of Wesley, and therefore of the movement, not to separate from the Church of England, an affirmation which would be restated on many subsequent occasions. Obedience to bishops was to be observed “in all things indifferent”³¹. This phrase, amongst others, indicates the willingness of John Wesley to acknowledge episcopal authority, but only if it did not counter his own sense of, and obedience to, the movement of the Holy Spirit. There is in this the evidence of a tension, which is not quite a tension as Wesley appears to resolve it with some ease, between the desire to remain within the established church, whilst adamantly asserting that the movement of the Holy Spirit was a greater authority. Thus at the 1745 Conference, Wesley stated that, “If any bishop wills that I should not preach the gospel, his will is no law to me”³².

The possibility of a break with the Church of England continued to be an issue within these early conferences with further assertions of obedience by Wesley to the authority of the Church, but only “so far as was consistent with obedience to God”³³. In the Minutes of the 1747 Conference, for example, Wesley states;

³¹ Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 111.

³² This quote from John Wesley quote is widely cited, and at the 1745 Conference the question asked after the statement quoted above, was “But if he (*a governor, temporal or spiritual*) produce a law against your preaching?” to which Wesley’s reply is recorded “I am to obey God rather than man”. See for example Watson, *The Life of Rev. John Wesley*, A.M. 156

³³ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 294.

‘We will obey the rules and the governors of the church whenever we can consistently with our duty to God: whenever we cannot we will quietly obey God rather than man’³⁴.

These are telling phrases and suggest the strength of Wesley’s sense of divine calling to the purposes of salvation in which he was engaged. Whilst his love for the Church of England is evident, so also is his refusal to compromise his sense of the activity of the Holy Spirit at work within the revival.

As with the development of other ‘Methodist’ structures, the Conference which was to become the decision-making authoritative being, was in its origins rather more simply a place for meeting and advice-seeking. Business was dealt with through a series of questions and answers, in which a question was raised by Wesley or another preacher, and an answer provided by Wesley.

Over the decades that followed, the subjects coming before the Conferences reflected some of the wider concerns within the movement over issues such as the nature and style of Wesley’s authority, the location of leadership - i.e. locally or centrally, and as time passed, the key issue of who would lead Methodism after the deaths of the brothers.

The response of the preachers to the Conference over the years was also of interest. Initially Wesley invited a few of his preachers to confer with him, the Conference then became a more open meeting to which some preachers were invited, whilst others could attend if they wished. In time, however, as Frank Baker put it,

“preachers...came to regard their Conference privileges as the inalienable rights of a democratic institution instead of the responsibilities delegated by a benevolent dictator”³⁵

³⁴ Quoted in many references to Wesley such as Outler, *John Wesley*, 173

³⁵ Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*. 200

Attendance at Conference was seen more as a meeting to which the preachers felt they had the right to be present, rather than something that was required of them. This is an important move in terms of the thinking of the Methodist people in the view taken of Conference as a location of authority, or episcopate, at which the preachers wished to be present.

The authority of the Conference also became more necessary as time passed. In relation to individual preaching houses, for example, Wesley was determined that they should not be seen as being the preserve of the local congregations to do with as they pleased, but should rather be linked with other societies. Furthermore, they were to be places where preaching was in accordance with his teachings.

Again this marks a development in thinking from the origins of local evangelical causes often brought about through local people, towards a connected framework of Methodist fellowships and buildings, in which preaching would follow prescribed doctrine, and which would remain as such after Wesley's death. In this, as in other things, Wesley was keen to establish a means by which the shape of a connexional movement would continue even when he was no longer there to oversee.

To this end, it became apparent during the 1780's that the Conference, as then constituted, did not have legal authority. In part this realisation arose from a dispute with the society in Birstall³⁶ in Yorkshire which maintained that it had the right to appoint and displace preachers, rather than accepting those whom Wesley appointed. As is not infrequently the case, an individual dispute was to provide the evidence for a need for general legislation.

Wesley tried hard to persuade the Birstall society to come in line, and visited the society on Friday September 5th 1783. In his Journal, Wesley notes:

³⁶ This case is well-documented by Baker in *John Wesley and the Church of England* amongst other writers

“After nine I met the nineteen trustees, and...said; “All I desire is that this house may be settled on the Methodist plan; and the same clause may be inserted in your Deed which is inserted in the Deed of the new chapel in London, viz, “In the case the doctrine of practice of any preacher should, in the opinion of the major part of the trustees, be not conformable to Mr W[esley]’s *Sermons and Notes on the New Testament*³⁷...another preacher shall be sent within three months” ‘ Five of the trustees were willing to accept...the rest were not willing.”³⁸

In due course, on January 13th 1784, the Birstall trustees relented, and gave the Conference the right to appoint preachers. This case, which no doubt caused Wesley much work and not a little unease, is important in that it emphasised that the Methodist movement was to be a Connexional, and not a congregational movement. Property was, therefore, held in trust by local societies on behalf of the Connexion, and local trustees were not to be in control of who preached within their preaching houses. Such a decision was to be, after the passing of John and Charles Wesley, the decision of Conference.

1784 was a year of significance within the Methodist movement and a year which in three distinct ways marked a move towards the formation of a new Church, rather than Methodism remaining a non-separated movement within the established Church. Two of these moves, the ordination of ministers for America, and Wesley’s revision of the Book of Common Prayer, will receive comment in the next chapter. The third of the three developments was the Deed of Declaration.

The Deed did much to secure the future of Methodism as a Connexion, and to provide an ordered means by which authority resided with the Conference as the primary decision-making body. The Birstall-dispute had been important in

³⁷ it had already been established that these documents should form the basis for Methodist teaching and doctrine

³⁸ Curnock (ed) *The Journal of John Wesley*: volume 6, 444-445.

emphasising the need for such a development, especially as the legal advice which was offered had indicated that the Conference as then constituted lacked adequate definition as Methodism's source of authority.

Wesley's deputy in the Birstall negotiations and also in a dispute over the New Room in Bristol was Thomas Coke, who will feature more fully in the next chapter. Coke's University education at Oxford was in Civil Law, and he increasingly became aware of the need for a legal means to be established to hold Methodism together after the death of Wesley. This view was confirmed by John Maddocks, a Lincoln's Inn barrister, who, informed Coke and his lawyer colleague William Clulow, that, in the words of Richard Heitzenrater, "the Conference as it presently existed could not legally assume Wesley's power or property. There was therefore no provision for a center of union among the people called Methodists after Wesley's death."³⁹

The degree to which the Deed was the result of Wesley's input or that of Thomas Coke, is difficult to ascertain. Coke was keen to distance himself from one of the clauses, namely the controversial identification of one hundred members who would make up the Conference in future years - the selection of the names of those to be included or excluded from the hundred being a matter of some dispute.

In addition to the naming of the hundred members of Conference, the Deed also laid down fifteen regulations for the way in which future conferences were to be conducted. These included:-

- the Conference to meet annually
- decisions to be made by majority vote
- a President and Secretary to be chosen annually by the Conference
- the Conference to decide upon the powers of the President
- the Conference to have the powers to admit preachers into Connexion
- those elected as members to have been in Connexion for at least a year

³⁹ Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People called Methodists*, 282.

- preachers to be appointed to chapels only where the chapels are in Connexion, and appointments to be for a maximum of three years

It needs to be emphasised that none of the clauses within the Deed was designed to supersede the authority of the Wesleys, which would continue within the movement during their lifetimes. As Henry Rack put it, “none of these provisions was to extinguish, lessen, or abridge the ‘life-estate’ of John and Charles Wesley in the chapels”.⁴⁰ The Deed did, however, serve as a means by which the Conference could be seen as a properly constituted governing body. Furthermore, it put in place a means by which the movement as a connexional movement could continue after the death of its founder(s). The alternative, which the Birstall incident had illuminated, was the prospect of societies going their own way after the Wesleys’ deaths, thus undoing the work which had been done to form a Connexionally-linked movement.

An additional consequence was the real sense that Methodism was becoming, if it had not already become, something rather more than a movement. The Deed, in its intention of defining the terms by which Conference should operate, had nothing to say about relationships with the Church of England. As Frank Baker notes in relation to this intention of defining operational terms, “even in doing this, however, especially in doing it as if the Conference were no concern at all of the Church, Wesley was setting up methodism as a separate institution.”⁴¹

There can be little doubt that during the significant events of the 1780’s, John Wesley was mindful of his own mortality, and the future shape of Methodism. His clear intention was that it should continue to follow his teachings and doctrines, and that it should continue to be a Connexional being. Whilst stating his ongoing desire for that being to remain within the established

⁴⁰ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 504.

⁴¹ Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 229.

Church, his actions in preserving its future, and enabling it to become a Church in its own right in America, would lead to a different course.

From origins to questions

The origins of the Methodist societies and the ways in which they operated are important legacies for contemporary British Methodism. In particular three features of this early development will, it is suggested, play an important part in the consideration of contemporary Methodist episcopate which is to follow at a later stage within this thesis.

Firstly, the origin of Methodism as a movement rather than a denomination, was instrumental in the nature of oversight which was introduced. Whilst Wesley was clearly the leader of the movement, he did not take on a particular title which might have been the case were a new church being formed. As noted above, this did not diminish the status which Wesley was given, and which he himself acknowledged, within Methodism, but the growth of Methodism as a non-separated movement in relation to the Church of England maintained Wesley's position not as a Bishop of Methodism, but as an Anglican presbyter.

A further aspect of its development as a movement was the evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, nature of its emerging organisational structures. As noted earlier, these structures tended to arise in response to particular issues within the developing movement, rather than more intentionally. Where layers of organisation were put in place, they were given distinctively non-Anglican descriptors such as 'Assistants', 'Circuits' and 'Conference', rather than mimicking Anglican terminology.

These factors, it will be argued in the next chapter, differed from the situation in the post-revolutionary America, where Methodism quickly became a separated church. In America, Wesley rapidly needed to establish leadership outside the

structures of the Church of England, so that Methodism as a Church in its own right, could exist and the needs of the worshipping people be met.

Secondly, the development of the Conference was critically important for the future shape of Methodism, and this continues to be fundamental in contemporary Methodist thinking. The placing of collective or corporate episcopate at a national level within a Conference, rather than following the route of resting it with individuals, will receive further consideration as it is considered to be an important legacy from the formation of Methodism. It would seem that the not inconsiderable authority which was held by John Wesley, was seen as something that should not necessarily be continued by his successors, and thus the place of Conference has continued to be significant.

As noted above, following Wesley's death, the Conference was chaired by a President serving for one year only, which as John Munsey Turner put it, was in part to ensure that "there were to be 'no more Kings in Israel'"⁴². Not only did this seek to avoid the notion of one man being needed as a successor to Wesley, but it also asserted a particular authority to the Conference as a body, rather than to an individual leader as head.

This is not to say that powerful figures would not emerge within Methodism over the coming centuries, but the adoption of a one-year Presidency was an important step, and a practice which has continued until the present day. It may be viewed as somewhat ironic that a denomination which essentially began through the efforts of one revered man, left a legacy which ensured that future revered men would not have the same status bestowed upon them, as was bestowed upon the founder.

Thirdly, the linking of societies together within a Connexional system was hugely important for the future of Methodism. This marked a clear differentiation between Methodism and congregationalism, and - as with the

⁴² Turner, *John Wesley The Evangelical Revival and the rise of Methodism in England*, 111.

place of the Conference - continues to be an influential concept in the contemporary Methodist Church. The sense of churches being linked one with another, provides mutual support for congregations of varying size and means. It has also been a significant factor within recent discussions regarding the possible introduction of an episcopacy, and how such an introduction should be connexional rather than diocesan.

At a broader level, the legacy of the 18th Century origins of Methodism gives rise to some of the questions which will be addressed within the research part of this study. In particular, the study will explore the place of the original structures and ethos of Wesley's movement within the life and heart of contemporary Methodism, and question the extent to which those structures remain beneficial for the life of today's Church. In other words, are they still fit for purpose, or is contemporary Methodism holding on to the past, at some cost to the present and future Church.

Chapter 2 - American Independence for Country and Church

The split with home - ministerial provision

The growth of the Methodist movement in Britain was accompanied by the practical, theological and ecclesiological dilemmas associated with meeting the worship and sacramental needs of the growing Methodist societies, whilst maintaining loyalty to the Church of England into which the Wesleys were ordained. In this respect, John Wesley's organisational skills and strength of purpose in holding together the development of the new, within the family of the old, were significant. The situation for Methodists in America, particularly after the war which had secured independence for the country, was different, and would test Wesley's authority during the final years of his life.

The American context is important for this study, because it marks the development of Methodism within a different culture, at the same time as Methodism was formalising its structures of leadership within Britain.

Although, therefore, the growth of Methodism within the two countries was happening contemporaneously, different forms of episcopate resulted from the differing contexts. An examination of the American late-eighteenth century Methodist situation will therefore emphasise the importance of history and context in relation to emerging ecclesiology.

A consideration of this period in the history of American Methodism, reveals that for Wesley to maintain his leadership over a movement which was geographically far away, represented a considerable challenge. Authority and leadership would in due course move from him to those whom he appointed, and whose appointment was confirmed by American Methodists. It was their shaping of American Methodism which would itself reflect something of the new democracy that the nation had embraced. With the independence of the people, so the Methodist movement in America would also find its separation from John Wesley's benevolent, if somewhat controlling, autocracy.

The travels of the Wesley brothers to America earlier in the eighteenth century are well-documented, and visits by others including George Whitfield had also taken place. It was not, however, until the 1760's that Methodism appeared to be gathering momentum as one amongst many within the variety of denominations which were beginning to become established. Norwood⁴³ makes the point quite strongly that the initial development of Methodism in America did not result from the visits of leading figures within the British evangelical revival, but was, rather, a lay-movement, begun by lay-people. These included the first preacher in America, Robert Strawbridge, who not only preached without any apparent authority from anyone to do so, but also conducted baptisms and administered Holy Communion.

Methodism around this time developed especially strongly along the east coast of America, and pioneer figures such as Strawbridge had a noted influence. In being lay-instigated, and in many instances lay-led, the movement was already a step removed from the Church of England within which, even in America, Methodism was generally seen as having its home.

As societies developed, so the perceived need for a clearer structure of leadership from better-educated preachers grew. An appeal for help from Wesley followed, and in response to a direct request from New York Methodists in 1768, Wesley appointed "the first of a series of missionary preachers to give direction to the struggling little societies.." ⁴⁴ Over the years preceding the Revolution, further missionary preachers were sent by Wesley. The most notable of these was Francis Asbury who arrived in 1771 at the age of twenty-four, and who was to become the leading figure within American Methodism over the following decades.

⁴³ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*.

⁴⁴ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 67.

Whilst the numbers of Methodists was not great when the growing population of the country is considered, it was clearly a developing movement. For example, in 1773 there were over a thousand reported members, with the majority being in Maryland and Virginia. This number had increased to 15,000 by 1784 with a continuing pattern of stronger representation in some areas than in others⁴⁵.

The War of Independence did not stifle the growth, but did result in all of Wesley's missionary preachers having left, with the exception of Francis Asbury. This situation, termed by John Pollock in his biography of Wesley as "grievous"⁴⁶, therefore created a situation where leadership was absent, and the basics of ministry within the Methodist societies through the provision of the sacraments and the leading of worship, were in short supply.

It is worth noting that at this time Methodism in the Southern States dealt with the shortage of appointed leaders in a different way from the Northern States. In the South, 1779 saw the appointment of a presbytery of four preachers who ordained each other, and then ordained other preachers. This was in contrast to the situation in the North where Asbury was recognised as "general assistant"⁴⁷. In this role he had sought agreement from the Southern preachers not to self-ordain, but his plea had been ignored.

This marked a key division between the two geographic areas of American Methodism, and although, as Norwood points out, the ordinations in the South were not reflective of an episcopal model of churchmanship, they were in opposition to the thinking of both Asbury and Wesley. In due course, divisions

⁴⁵ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 74.

⁴⁶ Pollock, *John Wesley*, 236.

⁴⁷ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 92.

would not only be in relation to church-leadership, but also to key political and social issues including slavery.

In deciding not to follow the pattern of presbyteral leadership begun by the South, Northern Methodism required ordained ministry from another source, and therefore appeals to John Wesley for leaders followed. As he had done before, Wesley responded to the need for leadership by sending three further preachers to America in 1784. The difference was, however, that this time Wesley ordained them first, and appointed one of their number - Thomas Coke - as 'Superintendent'. The sending of the three men was noted by Wesley in his journal entries for August 31st and September 1st 1784, where he indicates that Thomas Coke was to return to America after a visit to Britain, accompanied by the appointment of "Mr Whatcoat and Mr Vasey to go and serve the desolate sheep in America".⁴⁸

In the cases of Whatcoat and Vasey, ordination by Wesley was a step away from an observance of the discipline of the Church of England. In the case of Coke, an already-ordained Anglican priest, a further ordination as Superintendent was an even more significant step. As Wesley wrote in Coke's ordination certificate,

"I have this day set apart as a Superintendent by the imposition of my hands and prayer. (being assisted by other ordained ministers) Thomas Coke Doctor of Civil Law and Presbyter of the Church of England a man whom I judge to be well qualified for that great work...."⁴⁹

The need for ministerial provision and the purpose of the ordination are also given within the certificate which states that Coke is "to administer the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lords Supper according to the usage of the said

⁴⁸ Curnock (ed) *The Journal of John Wesley*:volume VII, 15.

⁴⁹ Taken from a facsimile of the Ordination Certificate reprinted in Curnock (ed) *The Journal of John Wesley*:volume VII, inserted facing page 16

Church. And whereas there does not appear to be any other way of supplying them with Ministers.” In addition to the absence of ministers, Wesley also recognised the different situation which pertained in America where Church of England bishops and priests had no legal jurisdiction. Furthermore, Wesley did not take the action which he did, without initial attempts to request ordinations for America from the Bishop of London. Requests which were unsuccessful.

The ordinations which Wesley saw as necessary for America, caused rifts in England and served as an indicator of the drift from the Church of England which would in due course lead to separation. Charles Wesley’s famous, or infamous, repost to his brother in verse-form carried little disguise regarding his views of the ordination, and the sense that Coke’s appointment was episcopal not only in nature, but effectively in title. The verse,

*“So easily are Bishops made
By man’s or woman’s whim?
W_____ his hands on C_____ ⁵⁰ hath laid,
But who laid hands on him?”⁵¹*

makes the point which is further emphasised in a letter from Charles to Vincent Peronnet, a well-regarded advisor to, and occasional intermediary between, the Wesleys who was also, somewhat ironically in view of the subject of the letter, nicknamed “the Archbishop of Methodism” by Charles⁵². Charles Wesley wrote,

“I can scarcely yet believe that ...my brother, my old intimate friend and companion, should have assumed the episcopal character, ordained elders, consecrated a bishop, and sent him to ordain the lay preachers in America”. ⁵³

⁵⁰ W_____ presumed to mean Wesley. C_____ presumed to mean Coke.

⁵¹ An oft-quoted verse - see for example Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 518.

⁵² Watson et al., *Companion to Hymns and Psalms*, 596.

⁵³ Quoted by Tabraham in *Brother Charles*, 97.

There would certainly appear to have been no indication from John Wesley to his brother that he was to take this course of action. Indeed, John's diary indicates that the brothers were together the day before the first two ordinations took place, and his entry for the events themselves offer little information about what actually took place. The vocabulary used is also of interest. In the Journal the term "appointed" rather than "ordained" is used. However, in his personal diary which described each day's events in summary with the times they took place, the entries for Wednesday September 1st 1784 in relation to Whatcoat and Vasey, and September 2nd in relation to Coke, use the terms "ordained". Beyond that, the entries only then refer to fairly mundane day-to-day events.⁵⁴ A very cursory account of a significant event is indeed offered.

Together with the use of two terms - appointed and ordained - so the word used to describe Coke's new role would vary. The episcopal nature of Coke's appointment seemed to have been of little doubt to Charles Wesley, although the descriptor 'Superintendent' was used. John's views on this at the time are less clear, although as will be seen shortly, he later rails against the use of the term Bishop by Asbury.

The absence of elaboration from Wesley in his Journal and diary may serve to indicate an awareness of the significant step which he had taken, and the view which would be taken of it not only by his brother, but by other leading Methodists. Earlier in 1784, the Conference meeting in Leeds had heard of the need for ministers to be sent to America, and the proposed sending of men for this purpose. However, the details regarding the accompanying ordinations were only divulged to a smaller grouping, which did not include Charles Wesley who was conveniently in Bristol. A member of this smaller grouping was John Pawson, a twice-President of the Methodist Conference after John

⁵⁴ Curnock (ed) *The Journal of John Wesley*: volume VII, 15.

Wesley's death, who reported that when the possibility of ordinations for America had been raised by Wesley,

"The preachers were astonished when this was mentioned, and to a man opposed it. But I plainly saw that it would be done, as Mr Wesley's mind appeared to be quite made up"⁵⁵

It was evident, therefore, that the means by which the "desolate sheep" were to be ministered unto, was through the provision of leaders who had been ordained by Wesley, and in one case had been ordained into the role of Superintendent. This role was to exercise episcopate, though not yet termed episcopal. This controversial development marked a point of division between the position of Methodism as a movement within a 'mother-church', and the forming of a new denomination.

Although the ordinations provided a clear signal for the development of episcopal Methodism in America, they also acted as a precursor to the development of the Methodist Church in Britain after Wesley's death, a Church which would be different in nature, and in leadership, from its older American cousin.

Liturgical provision

In addition to the provision of Methodist leaders to organise the American societies and enable their worship to take place, Wesley also provided the words for worship through the revision of the Book of Common Prayer. In this, the signs of the development of the movement into a Church in America, and also the gradual move away of American Methodism from Wesley's control, could be seen.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Tyerson, *The Life and Times of Revd John Wesley MA Founder of the Methodists*, 428.

Wesley's high regard for the Book of Common Prayer is evident from his journals, but he was also not uncritical of elements within it. In his preparation of the revision of the Book of Common Prayer which was entitled 'The Sunday Service', Wesley was not only able to rephrase it so that it would be acceptable to newly-independent American worshippers, but also to simplify its language and revise its theology, so that it was in keeping with his own theology and churchmanship.

The Sunday Service, therefore, provided for a liturgy which allowed the necessary changes in wording for the new political monarch-less situation in America where prayers for the royal family were no longer appropriate⁵⁶, and at the same time enabled a new form of liturgy to be developed.

The Sunday Service was printed for use in the American congregations in 1784, but in its printing there was some evidence of the growing independence of Methodism in America. Frank Baker⁵⁷ notes that Thomas Coke was given the task of overseeing the printing process, and that he made some alterations to the text - for example omitting the signing of the cross at Baptism, and the manual acts at Holy Communion. Although Wesley corrected these omissions in amendments, his corrections did not necessarily find their way into the services which were actually used.

Democratic independence

Coke, Whatcoat and Vasey arrived in America in early-November 1784. In Delaware, Coke met Francis Asbury for the first time. During their meeting Asbury was made aware of Wesley's wish that he should take on the role of Joint Superintendent alongside Coke. This wish was made clear in Wesley's

⁵⁶ In some areas of America, however, that remained loyal to the British crown, more traditional wording remained. Thus 'The Sunday Service of the Methodists in His Majesty's Dominions' was one such variation.

⁵⁷ Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 252.

letter which returned with Coke and his colleagues. Asbury was “shocked” by Wesley’s wish, and was clear that he would not change his existing role within American Methodism unless such a change was unanimously approved by this fellow-preachers⁵⁸. In other words, he was not prepared simply to abide by Wesley’s direction, and instead saw the need for the leadership of the American Methodists to be democratically approved.

Given the need for this matter to be resolved, and for other issues regarding the movement’s future to be discussed, Asbury expressed his view that the Methodist preachers should be called together. This was agreed, and notification sent to preachers to gather in Baltimore on December 24th. The historic “Christmas Conference” was to last eleven days, and to establish the nature of the leadership of American Methodism. In so doing, both by the decisions that were taken, and the means by which they were made, marked a move away from Wesley’s and British paternity. Discussion over the future of the American societies resulted in the decision that they “should be erected into an independent church”⁵⁹.

In part the aim of the Conference was to ensure that the work of Methodism in American could be reestablished after the Revolution, and to this end much time was spent on matters related to this, including the ordination of elders. Documents brought from England by Coke, including the Sunday Service, were considered, and rather than being imposed upon the movement, it would appear that they were also dealt with democratically.

⁵⁸ Frederick Norwood quotes from Asbury’s journal in which he notes his surprise at the events which were unfolding, “I was shocked when first informed of the intention of these my brethren in coming to this county; it may be of God.” Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 99.

⁵⁹ Bucke *The History of American Methodism* 214

The democratic nature of the Conference, however, was especially evident in its elevation of Asbury to the role of General Superintendent alongside Coke. On Christmas Day Asbury was

“ordained or “set apart” a deacon by Coke, assisted by Whatcoat and Vasey; on Sunday, December 26, they ordained him elder; and on Monday, December 27, he was set apart as superintendent.”⁶⁰

Thomas Ware, one of the preachers present, noted in his journal “Life and Travels”, that “the plan of general superintendence...was a species of episcopacy”⁶¹.

The democratic nature of the decisions made by the Christmas Conference were clearly significant, but authors suggest that the hand of Asbury, like Wesley in Britain, was clearly at work. Russell Richey, for example, notes that during the Revolution the preachers met to confer and had “embraced a conferring role for themselves”, but they then “conceded to Francis Asbury a Wesley-like determining authority.”⁶² In time the nature of the Conferences in the United States developed, and whilst Asbury’s insistence that his authority should be confirmed democratically, it would seem that he was strong in leading decisions that were made.

In his comments on this stage of the development of the American Episcopal Church, James Matthews outlines the implications of Asbury’s insistence on the Conference deciding his role. He notes that it ensured that Asbury was not to be subject to recall to England by Wesley as had been the case with Coke, and that “superintendents should be answerable to an American body and episcopacy was to be from the very beginning basically a constitutional nature

⁶⁰ Matthews *Set apart to serve - the role of the episcopacy in the Wesleyan tradition*, 99

⁶¹ Quoted by Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 100.

⁶² Richey “Connection and connectionalism”, 216

and of necessity more democratic than autocratic.”⁶³ He also refers to an address by Bishop Nolan Harmon to the Council of Bishops in 1984, in which Harmon summarises the implications of Asbury’s stand and the outcome of the Christmas Conference thus,

“At that moment the sovereignty in Methodism jumped the ocean and became firmly fixed on this side. Perhaps neither Wesley nor Asbury realized it, but that is what happened...”⁶⁴.

Therefore the Baltimore Christmas Conference effectively established American Methodism as a separate Church, and whilst on the one hand Wesley appeared to hand-over to his American brethren authority to proceed as they saw fit, on the other hand he also took exception to the direction that some of their decisions, especially in relation to the term Bishop, had taken. His willingness to allow Coke and Asbury to take on the leadership of the American movement may in part have been pragmatic given Wesley’s age and the distance involved, but his letters do suggest an acceptance that the situation had changed. He wrote, for example,

“They are now at full liberty simply to follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church. And we judge it best that they should stand fast in that liberty wherewith God has so strangely made them free.”⁶⁵

The above quotation reflects a theological view of world events in which the hand of God was to be seen. The independence of the former colonies was viewed as ‘providential’, i.e. as being within the will of God, even if that will was not fully within Wesley’s understanding. Therefore, as God had “so strangely made them free”, then Methodists within America would also be free from the Church of England. Whilst, therefore, Wesley’s summary might at

⁶³ Matthews *Set apart to serve - the role of the episcopacy in the Wesleyan tradition*, 97.

⁶⁴ Matthews *Set apart to serve - the role of the episcopacy in the Wesleyan tradition*, 97.

⁶⁵ Telford (ed) *The Letters of the Rev John Wesley A.M.* volume VIII, 239.

first glance appear to have been gracious in its appreciation of a changed situation, the outcome was not necessarily one with which he agreed.

Wesley's criticism during this period could be quite biting, and he was certainly not able to accept without comment the moves made by the new Church. For example, whilst the term superintendent was used by Wesley in relation to Coke, and initially by Coke in relation to Asbury, it did not take long for it to be superseded by the title of Bishop. Wesley was critical of this, as well as other steps which were taken within the first few years after the Christmas Conference, such as the establishment of a Methodist College at Abingdon in Maryland which was entitled Cokesbury, thus bringing together the names of Coke and Asbury.

In a barbed letter to Asbury in 1788, Wesley criticised him on the basis of apparently seeking power for himself, both in the founding of a College which, at least in part, bore his name, and in using the term 'bishop'. Wesley wrote,

“....in one point, my dear brother, I am a little afraid both the Doctor and you differ from me. I study to be little; you study to be great...I found a school; you a college! nay and call it after your own names!....
.....How can you, how dare you suffer yourself to be called Bishop? I shudder, I start at the very thought!.....For my sake, for God's sake put a full end to this.”⁶⁶

Wesley was to find on more than one occasion that the realities of trying to control from a distance were not to his liking, and his lack of success further emphasised the separation between the founding Methodist movement and the American Episcopal Church which now had its own leadership. Not that this was without pain on both sides. In a reference believed to have been made to

⁶⁶ Telford (ed) *The Letters of the Rev John Wesley A.M.* volume VIII,, 71.

the above letter, Asbury spoke of it as a “bitter pill from one of my greatest friends”⁶⁷.

Further signs of Wesley’s loss of control followed. In 1787, for example, his directions that a Conference should be held and Whatcoat appointed as Superintendent alongside Asbury were met with opposition from the American preachers who were no longer prepared to accept instruction from afar, and rejected Wesley’s instruction at their Conference.

Within the space of four years, the movement of Methodists within America had developed into an Episcopal Church with a democratically-appointed leadership which saw itself as increasingly independent from Wesley’s control, to the extent where it felt able to even reject his instructions. Whilst continuing to pay due reverence to its founding father, it was evident that the Episcopal Church had embraced self-determination, and in so doing had located episcopacy within an ordained episcopacy, something that would never find a similar move in British Methodism.

In his commentary on this period, Mark Noll noted that it was the Methodists and Baptists who saw successful growth in the United States after Independence, and amongst the reasons he suggests for this was the way in which these movements brought together effective leadership with a democratic appeal.⁶⁸ Kenneth Cracknell agreed in his analysis specifically of Methodism, and amongst other factors cited Methodism’s ability to occupy the space left by the Church of England, its highly mobile structure, the nature of its belief in “the inexhaustibility of transforming grace”, together with its ability to identify with the hopes and ambitions of the new country.⁶⁹ These factors, and

⁶⁷ From Asbury’s Journal and widely quoted including an early reference by Alexander McCaine, *The History and Mystery of Methodist Episcopacy*, 35.

⁶⁸ Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 153.

⁶⁹ Cracknell “The Spread of Wesleyan Methodism”, 248

no doubt others beside, led to the growth of Methodism in the United States so that within a couple of generations it had become a significant Christian denomination within the country.⁷⁰

From Superintendent to Bishop

Between the years 1785 and 1790, the Minutes of the General Conferences held in America trace the development of the use of the terms Superintendent and Bishop. The Minutes also outline the way in which the American Church was becoming increasingly independent. These changes are outlined by James Matthews⁷¹, who quotes from the Minutes for each year. For example, in 1787, questions within the Minutes read:

“Question 1: Who are the Superintendents of our church for the United States?

Answer: Thomas Coke (when present) and Francis Asbury.”

It will be noted that Wesley’s name is omitted from the ‘Answer’, and that this is the same Conference which rejected his plan in relation to Whatcoat.

By 1788, the question, with a similar answer, had become: ‘Who are the Bishops of our church, for the United States?’.

In 1790, the one question is replaced with two, namely,

“Question 6: Who have been elected by the unanimous suffrages of the General Conference to superintend the Methodist Episcopal Church in America?

Answer: Thomas Coke, Francis Asbury”

and

⁷⁰ David Hempton, for example, notes that “In 1776 Methodists accounted for only 2.5 percent of the religious adherents...by 1850 the Methodist share was 34.2 percent. Hempton, *The Religion of the People’ Methodism and popular religion c 1750-1900*, 9.

⁷¹ Matthews *Set apart to serve - the role of the episcopacy in the Wesleyan tradition*, 120-123.

“Question 7: Who are the persons that exercise the Episcopal Office in the Methodist Church in Europe and America?

Answer: John Wesley, Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, in regular order and succession.”

The title Bishop, rather than Superintendent, therefore appeared at an early stage within the conference minutes, with the way in which the Episcopal Church was organised, and the beliefs to which it subscribed, being summarised in a document called a ‘Discipline’, which was revised as necessary. A revision in 1787, introduced the term Bishop for the first time, and its usage, according to Matthews, “was soon established firmly.”⁷²

The few years which receive note here in relation to American Methodism, indicate the development of two locations for leadership and authority. Firstly, Methodists within an independent America saw the importance of taking key decisions to a democratic Conference, rather than accepting Wesley’s will. In one sense, therefore, the presiding authority within American Methodism was the Conference, and it might be argued that authority therefore lay corporately with a body of people.

The second, and somewhat oppositional, factor arising from the early stages of the American Methodist Church relates to the apparent ease with which the title of Bishop was adopted. The association within Britain of the episcopal title and the Church of England, having no longer such connotations in America, appear to have eased its use by the American Methodists without the qualms that would have accompanied its use by Wesley himself.

The literature suggests, however, that the view of episcopacy in America was somewhat different than would have been Wesley’s view steeped, as it was, in

⁷² Matthews *Set apart to serve - the role of the episcopacy in the Wesleyan tradition*, 123.

Anglicanism. James Kirby, for example, writes that, “Asbury..had little knowledge of bishops, and in all likelihood had never even seen one”, and that the titles of superintendent and bishop “were synonymous, but bishop was more commonly found in Scripture”.⁷³ Furthermore, Kirby asserts that Asbury and his colleagues, in the use of the term bishop, did not intend a third-order of ministry to be established, because their use of episcopal title did not represent a higher order. In other words, their understanding of episcopacy was different from Wesley’s.

Asbury was also able to assert his sense of divine calling to the office of Bishop. Norwood⁷⁴ quotes from Asbury’s diary entry for 1805 in which he provides a list to justify his authority, including his ordination by Coke, and election by the Christmas Conference, and he includes the phrase, “because the signs of an apostle have been seen in me”.

Having fixed the title of those who held the highest office in the Methodist Episcopal Church as Bishop, the nature of that title and the role which accompanied it, is now worthy of examination especially in relation to its itinerant, travelling nature in which at least the shadow of Wesley’s non-stop ministry could be seen.

What kind of Bishop?

In a similar way in which British Methodism in the contemporary age has its roots very clearly in the structures which John Wesley introduced, so the structure of American Methodism, including the role of bishops, finds its origins in the person and ministry of Francis Asbury. Although, as noted earlier, it was Thomas Coke who was sent by Wesley to lead the American

⁷³ Kirby, *Methodist Episcopacy*, 233.

⁷⁴ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 142.

Church, his frequent returns to England, and his wider work of mission in other countries, meant that it was Asbury who was the more influential.

In his manner of leadership, there were similarities with Wesley. Asbury was very much the leader of the church, and those appointed to the office of district superintendent accompanied him under his leadership. The appointment of Whatcoat to the office of Bishop, and the presence of Thomas Coke when he was in the United States, did not change the reality that they were assistants to Asbury, rather than being part of a co-equal triumvirate. Richey and Frank summarise the relationship between Asbury and Coke thus,

“When the two superintendents traveled together Coke might claim the pulpit. However, Asbury ran the show. Coke performed, Asbury governed.”⁷⁵

Asbury was, like Wesley, very much the itinerant leader who set an example by his unceasing work. Itinerancy was, indeed, seen as a key mark of episcopal office. Richey and Frank conclude,

“Bishops Asbury and Coke made clear that itinerancy defined episcopate, that it reclaimed the patterns of the apostolic church, and that it functioned to sustain the oneness, holiness and catholicity of apostolicity.”⁷⁶

In the same vein, Kirby, having outlined Asbury’s considerable travelling which included 3,000 miles in one year, noted that if a superintendent ceased to travel, “he would be declared ineligible for any ministerial office in the church”⁷⁷ Asbury, like Wesley, was able to respond to complaints from preachers about

⁷⁵ Richey and Frank, *Episcopacy in the Methodist Tradition*, 82.

⁷⁶ Richey and Frank, *Episcopacy in the Methodist Tradition*, 59

⁷⁷ Kirby, “Methodist Episcopacy”. 234

their workload, by simply pointing to his own ministry as an example, and reminding them that their work was for Christ.

The focus upon itinerancy is therefore of significance. Methodism, from its Wesleyan origins, was a movement which sought to take the gospel to where the people were, and was, and at least in principle still is, a missionary movement. As noted in an earlier section, John Wesley travelled extensively during his ministry to preach in numerous locations, and he then to superintend the societies which had grown up. In this respect, there was a sense in which Wesley's ministry was in the line of that of St Paul who, similarly, travelled as a missionary and as an encourager of the early Christian churches. Wesley's example was followed by Coke in his travels in America and elsewhere, and more specifically by Asbury in his extensive travelling within America.

In their notes from 1798, Coke and Asbury make clear the importance of the itinerant nature of the episcopacy as they state, "it would be a disgrace to our episcopacy to have bishops on their plantations...instead of breathing the spirit of their office..."⁷⁸ The itinerant nature of leadership within the Church has continued to be a feature within contemporary American Methodism, and underlines the role of the Bishop as being general, rather than local, in terms of location and service. In this respect, Bishops were given the role of visiting the connection as a whole, a role which they shared with other bishops as part of a general superintendency.

Itinerancy was not only a mark of the ministry of Bishops, however, for it was present to some degree or other within the whole of the movement. At local level, therefore, preachers would not preach in their home churches each week,

⁷⁸ Coke and Asbury, *The Doctrines and Disciplines of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America - 1798*, 42. Available at the website page http://www.enterhisrest.org/ichabod/methodism_coke.pdf accessed 3rd July 2013

but would move around the Circuit; ministers were itinerant and were to be available to be stationed across the connection, rather in being confined to a notional home area. It is within this history and culture of itinerancy, that Bishops have to have their place. Mathews, in reflecting upon this tradition, states "The preachers itinerated as did the bishops as part of an itinerant ministry....a traveling ministry required a traveling superintendency."⁷⁹

The itinerant nature of ministry within the Church continues to the present day, so that ministers - in common with their British counterparts - are sent to a Church or Circuit, rather than being 'owned' by that local congregation. Therefore the connectional nature of the church is stressed - the local is part of the national, and those appointed to serve locally, remain under national-authority.

In addition to itinerancy, the role of the bishop as being a general superintendent is also important. American Methodist Bishops continue to be appointed to a particular area for a particular period of time, but also to have responsibilities which reach beyond the local in that they are charged with concern for the whole church, and are representatives of the whole church in the local situation.

Differences between the role and understanding of episcopacy in the United Methodist Church, and that which is present within churches which see the episcopacy as lying within an ordained and historical order of bishops, are present. This is emphasised through the nature of their appointment in the United Methodist Church, in that they are consecrated rather than being ordained. This marks an important difference in the interpretation of the episcopate when compared to an Episcopal Church where the bishops are ordained into a different order of ministry to presbyters or priests.

⁷⁹ Mathews, *Set Apart to Serve*, 199.

Bishop Nolan Harmon emphasises this point when he writes, “In the Episcopal Church bishops are regarded as belonging to a third order....In United Methodism...there are only two orders, deacons and elders; the bishop is simply an elder who has been set aside for a peculiar administrative task - that of superintendent in the church”⁸⁰.

The features of American Methodist episcopacy as identified above, and having early historical roots, are summarised in the Discipline of the United Methodist Church⁸¹. where its description of the role of Bishops is described under three main headings, Leadership, Presidential Duties and Working with Ministers.

In this, *‘leadership’* is demonstrated through the Bishop’s itinerancy within the Connection⁸² so that the Church is led in its mission, and that the aims of the wider Church are known at a more local level. There is therefore a sense in which the Bishops operate as a bridge between the local and the connectional in relation to mission and evangelism.

‘Presidential duties’ include the responsibility to preside at the Conferences that take place, and for the appointment of district superintendents, the consecration of bishops, and the commissioning of deaconesses. These roles are taken on behalf of the whole church which have had varying levels of involvement in the necessary decisions leading to and end-point of the bishop’s approval.

‘Working with Ministers’ is defined in terms of the organisation of Circuits, and in relating to ministers serving within particular locations. Once again,

⁸⁰ Harmon, *Understanding the United Methodist Church*, 118

⁸¹ The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church

⁸² The United Methodist Church uses the spelling “Connection”, rather than the British continuation of the form “Connexion”

therefore, this role is undertaken representationally on behalf of the wider Church.

These three areas indicate the nature of the role as being in part representational episcopate. In other words, bishops are appointed to represent the Connection as leaders and teachers as they travel to different churches, and also within the liturgical services at which their presence is required, namely ordinations. This representational role is summarised by James Matthews by the phrase, “where the bishop goes, there the life of the church should be enlivened and enriched”⁸³.

This chapter only serves to provide a brief account of the origins of episcopacy in part of the new American Methodist Church served by Asbury and Coke. It is acknowledged that the history of American Methodism is substantial, and that there were differences between different regions within the United States after independence. In addition, changes naturally occurred as time passed, to the extent that the initial picture of the role of bishops has altered in the intervening centuries, although the initial features of episcopate remain.

James Kirby, for example, argues that steps such as the election of bishops at jurisdictional conferences, and a greater localisation of episcopacy especially after the uniting of different strands of Methodism in 1939 to form the United Methodist Church, reduced the notion of general superintendency. He also questions whether itinerancy has lost its place within the church. He states that:

“rarely have United Methodist Bishops lived or served outside the bounds of their jurisdictions, and almost without exception they have attended college and seminary there, too.”⁸⁴

⁸³ Matthews *Set Apart to Serve*, 256.

⁸⁴ Kirby ‘Methodist Episcopacy’, 240.

This would suggest that in reality, episcopacy has become more localised than Asbury's fervent itinerancy.

This brief summary is, however, offered as an introduction to another form of Methodist leadership which, as has been noted, grew out of British Methodism but quickly formed its own identity within a different context. This different identity included an understanding of episcopacy which was different from the Anglican Church, and therefore differed from Wesley's own picture of how it might have been.

The dual themes of history and context as significant influences on the formation of leadership will be returned to at a later stage. As the history of the British Methodism is explored more fully in the following section, it will be seen that the context within the Church developed was critical for the nature of leadership and oversight that was to be offered. A leadership which did not, unlike the American church, proceed down episcopal lines.

Chapter 3 Beyond Wesley - division and unity

The origins of division - leadership and relationships

Whilst in the United States the development of Methodist leadership could take place within a new national and ecclesiological context following American independence, the situation for Methodists in Britain following the death of John Wesley was rather different. This chapter will aim to offer a summary of the developments within Methodism after Wesley's death with their accompanying divisions, the formation of a united Methodist Church in 1932, and early reports into the possible introduction of episcopacy into Methodism in the third quarter of the twentieth century.

The 150 years covered by this period is important for the purpose of this study. The issues present for the developing strands of Methodism included the nature and location of leadership and authority, and these aspects were critical and divisive matters. In addition, and in association with the questions that arose over leadership, was the ongoing issue of the relationship between the Methodist societies and the Church of England - something which had been resolved in the post-revolutionary United States.

As noted in Chapter 1, the structures necessary for the organisation of a denominational church had already occupied Wesley's thoughts, and been established to some extent through the 1784 Deed of Declaration. However, as practices around the Connexion varied, and the inherited view of the founder was not as clear on particular matters as might have been desired, different proposals emerged concerning how Methodism was to conduct its affairs in the absence of its founder.

On March 30th 1791, nine Methodist preachers of significance produced a letter known as the Halifax Circular which outlined how Conference and wider Methodism might proceed were it to follow the model of not appointing, as the letter put it, “another King in Israel”, but rather to be “governed by the Conference Plan”⁸⁵.

The letter was in broad support of the Deed of Declaration. For example, it proposed that Presidents of Conference be elected for one year, as well as having one year appointments for other offices around the Connexion and in Ireland. Circuit should be grouped into Districts, and that between Conferences, it was proposed that different committees would “manage the affairs of their respective Districts”⁸⁶.

Other documents from this time provide evidence of the differences of view which were present when it came to the future direction of the movement. For example, Cornish Methodist delegates meeting in Redruth produced proposals which had a more localised democratic flavour to them in terms of local church and circuit decision making⁸⁷, and Turner refers to “an assertion of the need to maintain relationships with the Church of England” which came from Methodists in Hull⁸⁸.

The Conference which met in 1791 heard a letter written by John Wesley and read by Samuel Bradburn which underlined their founder’s intention that no one person should succeed him. Heizenrater notes that the Conference in seeking to follow Wesley’s wishes as far as they were able, “proceeded to adopt

⁸⁵ Taken from the documents collated by Vickers, “Documents and Source Material”, 241

⁸⁶ Vickers, “Documents and Source Material”, 241

⁸⁷ Vickers, “Documents and Source Material”, 243-4

⁸⁸ Turner, *Wesleyan Methodism*, 9

most of the proposals in the Halifax circular”⁸⁹. The Conference also created twenty-seven districts with nineteen in England, two in Scotland and six in Ireland so that business between Conferences could be managed.

One of the signatories to the Halifax Circular, William Thompson, was elected President for the year. As a layman he had neither been ordained by Wesley, nor by an Anglican Bishop, and thus his election could be taken as a symbolic rejection of any notion of succession from Wesley, i.e. that those whom Wesley ordained would take the leadership of the Church, and ordain others as President. As he was not as charismatic as some of his contemporaries, something of a separation was also marked from the leadership of the President being in the style of Wesley. Rack comments that, “It is easy to see this (*Thompson’s election*) as a snub to Coke’s ‘ambition’, but it was also a snub to other seniors.”⁹⁰

Although Thompson was a “self-styled ‘man of peace’”⁹¹, his presidency was not a peaceful time, and many issues relating to the ways in which the movement was to continue needed to be addressed. Amongst other issues, the movement was already divided over the matter of Methodist ordination, and the associated question of the continuing relationship with the Church of England.

Wesley had ordained in his lifetime not only for America, but also for Scotland in 1785, and for England four years later. Following his death, George notes

⁸⁹ Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People called Methodists*, 312

⁹⁰ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 521

⁹¹ Vickers (ed), *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, 351, and quoting Thompson’s own phrase from his letter of May 1791 to Richard Rodda, included in Vickers, ‘Documents and Source Material’, 246

that there were some “ordinations at District Meetings, but ordinations without the consent of the Conference were forbidden by the Conference of 1792”⁹².

Proposals for ordained Methodists continued however. Thomas Coke brought together a small group of leading figures including Henry Moore and Samuel Bradburn at a secret meeting in Litchfield in 1794⁹³. He proposed that those present be ordained by him, which was deferred for a Conference decision. Other proposals within the “Litchfield Plan” included the organisation of the Connexion into divisions which would be led by a Superintendent, and the ordination of deacons and elders. This “Bishops Plan” was rejected by Conference in part because of its potential for division through the elevation of some of the preachers⁹⁴.

When, a year later, Samuel Bradburn, who was one of the “Litchfield Plan” proposers, brought forward a further plan for ‘Travelling Bishops’ who would perform ordinations around the country, it was “shouted down with the general cry of ‘down with bishops!’”⁹⁵. This cry might be felt to have a contemporary resonance in some quarters of Methodism today, as will be considered later when moves towards the introduction of an episcopacy in more recent times have also been unpopular and unsuccessful.

The issue of ordination to the Methodist ministry was also an issue about the continuing place of Methodists in relation to the Church of England. Those, such as Alexander Kilham, argued for a complete separation from the Church of England so that it would have its own ordinations, and Holy Communion could be provided in Methodist chapels.

⁹² George, “Ordination” 153

⁹³ Vickers, “Documents and Source Material”, 257-9

⁹⁴ Vickers (ed), *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, 205

⁹⁵ Walsh, “Methodism at the end of the Eighteenth Century”, 280.

Other diverse views on Methodist ordination included:

- concern that ordinations would mark a further split with the Church of England
- the view was that Methodism, as an egalitarian movement, should not have an order of ministry which might be perceived as being somehow superior through ordination
- the proposition that if ordination was to happen at all, then it should be carried out by sympathetic Anglican bishops⁹⁶.

A range of opinion was therefore present on this issue, and it was not until 1836 that the Wesleyan Conference concurred with the view of their President, Jabez Bunting, that preachers who were received into full connexion “should be ordained by imposition of hands”⁹⁷, although Rack questions whether it is “strictly true” that ordinations ceased until then⁹⁸.

In addition to the controversies over ordination and relationships with the Church of England, there were equally serious disagreements concerning the relationship between local congregations or trustees, and the Conference and Connexion.

It will be recalled that during Wesley’s life-time he maintained his own authority over the local societies, and reserved the power to appoint stewards and helpers. In the first of his two articles on Connexionalism, Beck notes how Wesley saw all aspects of the movement to be in connexion with him, and Beck quotes from the Conference Minutes of 1766 “It is a power of admitting into and excluding from the Societies under my care; of choosing and removing

⁹⁶ see, for example, John Walsh, “Methodism at the end of the Eighteenth Century”, 281.

⁹⁷ George, “Ordination”, 154

⁹⁸ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*. 520

Stewards; of receiving or not receiving Helpers; of appointing them when, where and how to help me..."⁹⁹

In time, and obviously after the death of Wesley, the notion of connexionalism as being connected with Wesley, developed into a sense of connection with other Methodists, both locally, nationally and even internationally. The question of the oversight of local societies, which had been Wesley's oversight, was then open to debate as to whether it was to be a connexional oversight through the Conference or other means, or localised oversight through, for example, the stewards.

At the heart of this debate was the degree to which local congregations would have the right to determine key aspects of their worshipping lives, or whether every congregation came under connexional authority. It will also be recalled that such issues were not new, but post-Wesley their resolution was no longer within the powerful, persuasive, and creative hands of the movement's founder.

One case which illustrates some of these points occurred in Bristol in 1794 in relation to a disagreement between different chapels concerning the administration of the sacraments¹⁰⁰. Henry Moore, who had been ordained by Wesley in 1787, administered Holy Communion in Portland Chapel, Bristol, as he was authorised so to do by Conference. This was taken by the trustees of the New Room in Bristol as "a deliberate provocation to Church Methodists"¹⁰¹, and they prohibited him from preaching within their congregations. As Wilkinson notes that, "the real issue was whether trustees had the right to prohibit a preacher who was ordained by Conference....the important issue of

⁹⁹ Beck "Some Reflections on Connexionalism (1)" 49

¹⁰⁰ John Walsh, for example, provides an account of the controversy surrounding this case. Walsh "Methodism at the end of the Eighteenth Century", 283.

¹⁰¹ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*. 522

lay control was at stake”¹⁰². It was also, however, a mark of differing views regarding the place of the sacraments within Methodist chapels, and relationships with the Church of England. Moore’s ordination certificate included the words “to administer the Sacraments and the Lord’s Supper according to the usage of the Church of England¹⁰³”, and the post-Wesley movement would need to consider whether Methodism was to be separated and thus to have its own ministers and sacraments, or whether it was to continue as a part of the Church of England.

In 1795, Conference sought to offer a pragmatic solution to issues raised by Kilham and present as part of the Bristol problem. A document, “Articles of Agreement for General Pacification”, otherwise known as the Plan of Pacification, was agreed which allowed for the sacraments to be celebrated in Methodist chapels by and with the consent of the Conference; a majority of the trustees; and the stewards and church leaders. In addition, the status of Conference as the location from which preachers could be appointed was affirmed. This ‘Wesley-like’ move may have resolved the immediate problem, but not the significant issues which underpinned it, and the moves by Kilham and others for a separation from the Church of England.

Cases such as that concerning Henry Moore serve to highlight key areas of disagreement, i.e. the relationship with the Church of England, and the place of the Connexion through the Conference, rather than the local congregation, as the location of decision-making and church-authority. Writers, such as Barrie Tabraham, describe these tensions in terms of the views of two groupings of Methodists, namely ‘Church Methodists’ who continued to adopt a similar view towards the Church of England as Wesley had done, and ‘Methodist

¹⁰² Wilkinson, “The rise of other Methodist Traditions”, 280

¹⁰³ George, “Ordination”, 152-3

Dissenters' such as Kilham, who saw Methodism as a developing and growing movement with its own future outside the Church of England¹⁰⁴.

Tabraham makes the point that the emerging divisions, which eventually could not be resolved, were more about the way in which Methodism was to operate as a Church, rather than about fundamental doctrine or theology, and that this fact would assist in the re-union of the different strands of Methodism in the first half of the twentieth century where matters of Church order, rather than potentially deeper theological divisions, needed to be reconciled.

Division and fragmentation

Before re-union, however, came painful separation as sections of Methodism broke into different factions and denominations. A brief exploration of the groups which became separate from Wesleyan Methodism serves as a useful guide to the issues in relation to leadership and church authority which were at the heart of these divisions.

The demands which had been made by Alexander Kilham for separation from the Church of England did not abate, indeed they continued with some force, and he was expelled from the Connexion in 1796¹⁰⁵. He, together with a group of other preachers and congregations, formed the *Methodist New Connexion* the following year. Whilst strong in areas of the country - Turner, for example, notes that in Halifax whole congregations transferred allegiance to the New Connexion - overall numbers and growth was not great¹⁰⁶. Of significance, however, was the Connexion's focus upon localised decision-making and lay

¹⁰⁴ Tabraham, *The Making of Methodism*, 65.

¹⁰⁵ In *The life of the Rev Alexander Kilham* (subtitled 'A full account of the disputes which occasioned the Separation') the unnamed author outlines the 'trial' which took place at the Methodist Conference of 1796, which included charges of wasting public money, and "swindling", as well as disagreements which occurred over matters of church order and doctrine. Kilham made a strong defence, but was nevertheless expelled.

¹⁰⁶ Turner, *Wesleyan Methodism*, 10

leadership. At Conference, for example, ministers and laymen were represented equally.

Hezenrater notes that,

“This offshoot represented only the beginning of a process that continued through the following century with various groups becoming independent in order to preserve one or another fundamental principle that they thought was essentially Methodist or Wesleyan”¹⁰⁷.

A brief summary of some of these new denominations serves to indicate some of the issues that were present in terms of church identity and leadership.

The *Independent Methodists* were formed in 1806, and were also congregational in nature, with decision-making therefore being at local level. Independent Methodist Churches continue to operate outside the larger Methodist Church today, with a membership of around seventeen hundred people in eighty churches mainly in the north of England. Individual Independent Methodist churches continue to be self-governing so that they manage their own affairs and appoint their own preachers, with a Connexion which acts only as a “spiritual and collective focal point”¹⁰⁸.

Of the various movements being formed, the *Primitive Methodists*, established in 1811, constituted the largest grouping. This movement had an emphasis upon lay-ministry and an openness to worshipping in different ways. An account of the story of Primitive Methodism by Joseph Ritson in 1910 to mark the centenary of the movement, drew attention to the particular marks of primitivism including the acceptance of women preachers¹⁰⁹. He refers to their

¹⁰⁷ Heizenrater, *Wesley and the People called Methodists*, 317

¹⁰⁸ Taken from the website for the Independent Methodist Church - www.imcgb.org.uk

¹⁰⁹ The preacher ‘Dinah Morris’ is referred to in George Elliot’s *Adam Bede*, and was likely to have been the Primitive Methodist preacher Mrs Samuel Evans. See for example Vickers (ed) *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, 112.

acceptance by one of the founders of Primitive Methodism, Hugh Bourne, who was enabled, “readily to perceive the immense value of gifted and devoted women in evangelistic work, and from the beginning favoured their employment.”¹¹⁰

This should not, however, be over-stated. For example, in a 1996 lecture, Henry Rack¹¹¹ draws attention to women preachers’ “novelty value in drawing crowds in new areas”, in contrast to their lack of a presence within Primitive Methodist or Bible Christian hierarchy or position of authority which might have marked a rather more significant acceptance of their ministry.

Amongst other features of Primitive Methodism, was the vitality of worship with its origins in outdoor gatherings, extemporary prayer, vibrant singing and uplifting preaching. As with other movements, it also sought freedom from a centralised Connexionalism. There is a view that Primitivism reached poorer people more than the essentially middle-class Wesleyanism, and Tabraham states that a higher proportion of Primitive Methodist members tended to be from the lower social groupings that was the case with Wesleyan Methodists. He then goes on, however, to provide statistical evidence to support the argument that this social division can be over-stated¹¹².

The *Bible Christians*, formed in 1815 with a geographical base in the West Country, also had an openness to the active ministry of women, and had a leading role within the temperance movement. Whilst not directly an off-shoot from Methodism in that followers tended to come from geographical areas not really influenced by Methodism, the Bible Christians were organised on similar lines to the Primitive Methodists.

¹¹⁰ Ritson, *The Romance of Primitive Methodism*, 134.

¹¹¹ Rack, *How Primitive was Primitive Methodism?*

¹¹² Tabraham, *The Making of Methodism*, 68.

Together with these more major movements were smaller groupings which had seceded from Wesleyan Methodism for a variety of reasons. In 1857 the United Methodist Free Churches brought together some but not all of these movements, and others joined the Wesleyan Reform Union later in the century. Tabraham notes that the coming-together of smaller groups “were anticipating the much greater achievements of 1907 and 1932”¹¹³.

Within the movements summarised above, it will already be noted that there were particular themes present which are relevant to the study being pursued here. The focus upon congregational autonomy was of particular importance, and clearly in contrast with Wesley’s placing of authority within a national Conference. At times separation appears to have arisen from individual circumstances in which a society wished to pursue a course of action which was not permitted by the Connexional Conference, and which thus paved the way for secession. At other times such secession arose from the general desire to have greater local autonomy than Wesleyan structures permitted.

A second key element was the place of lay-people within the church. Wesleyan Methodism with male ministers who were received into full Connexion prior to ordination being introduced as an additional sign of their acceptance into ministry, was considered by many to be too traditional, and not sufficiently accepting of the ministry of all who were led to offer their gifts within the church. Thus movements developed which allowed and welcomed the expression of such ministry.

Divisions were not only present between the different strands of Methodism, but continued within them. Turner refers to these with reference especially to Wesleyan Methodism, as “the tension between parts of Wesley’s system”, and identifies the key fault areas as “discipline and democracy, connexion and

¹¹³ Tabraham, *The Making of Methodism*, 70.

locality, itinerant preachers and lay people”¹¹⁴. There is a sense in which these fault-lines have continued throughout Methodist history and, as will be noted later, are present in one form or other today.

1932 - unity reclaimed?

It is not necessary within the context of this study to provide a detailed account of the development of the different denominations of Methodism during the nineteenth century, however the key issues noted above needed to be addressed within the negotiations leading to Methodist Union in 1932.

The reasons for union outlined by Turner¹¹⁵ in his chapter on this period of Methodist history, cover a range of factors. For example, there was the need for the people of God to be seen as united - this gave not only an impetus to Methodist union, but also a sense that in time all Christian churches should be one. Secondly Methodist union was seen as part of a move towards union in other areas of life such as in the League of Nations. More parochially, union would result in a denomination with a larger membership and thus, it was argued, more status within the wider church.

These reasons, and others, led to the gradual exploration of how union might be achieved between groupings of Methodists who had significantly different ways of going about their business as a church. These differences in structure and leadership were compounded by strongly-held denominational loyalty. Within the same town or village different Methodist chapels could be present - even facing each other in the same street, and allegiances to particular Methodist branches were long-standing and would not be easily put aside.

¹¹⁴ Turner, *Wesleyan Methodism*, 11

¹¹⁵ Turner, “Methodism in England 1900-1932”

Turner cites the case of one mining village where there were still three chapels in the early 1960's with eventual unity coming about into one place of worship as late as 2004¹¹⁶. Brian Beck notes that "It was only in the 1970's that the real fruits of agreement reached forty years earlier began to be seen" and refers to the "local attitudes and loyalties (which) proved resistant to change."¹¹⁷ In order, therefore, for effective union to be accomplished there were very local as well as national or connexional issues to resolve.

The 1932 Deed of Union was the legal document in which the careful negotiations leading to union were enshrined. Both the negotiations and the Deed sought to retain elements from the different movements in terms of government, and the value placed upon the views of those involved.

This care was evident in some of the decisions that were taken. For example, Conference was to be presided over by an ordained minister, but a new lay office of Vice President was introduced. Similarly, the Deed sought to encompass the differing views present about the role and status of ordained ministry which had been the cause of earlier division. For example, in relation to the ordination of ministers¹¹⁸, the Deed affirmed the priesthood of all believers, and made the statement that ordained ministry was:

"...for the sake of Church Order and not because of any priestly virtue inherent in the office the ministers of the Methodist church are set apart by ordination to the ministry of the word and sacraments."¹¹⁹

Although the care exercised in the way in which the Deed and other aspects of the union were negotiated, enabled the different strands of Methodism to come together into one church, it is probably true to say that the Wesleyan focus upon

¹¹⁶ Turner *Wesleyan Methodism*, 71

¹¹⁷ Beck "Methodism: Shifting Balances 1939-2010" 67

¹¹⁸ relating at that time to the one order of presbyteral ministry

¹¹⁹ The Deed of Union:Section 2:4 'Doctrine' within *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*.

the authority of Conference and the place of ordained ministers have outweighed the traditions of the smaller uniting strands. Indeed, the Methodist Church some eighty years after union is a distinctly Connexional, rather than Congregational, Church, and one in which ordained ministry has a prominent place.

Other developments within the twentieth century have added to the sense that the Methodist Church today is one which asserts the importance of being a Connexional Church, and where the role of ordained ministers as leaders carries with it a greater Wesleyan than, say, Primitive Methodist flavour. For example, the growth in the liturgical movement, and a renewed focus upon the theology of the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion presided over by an ordained minister, have a Wesleyan rather than Primitive feel to them. Similarly, developing ecumenical relationships with the Church of England, joint ministerial training schemes, the introduction of the Common Lectionary (and the greater expectation that preachers will use it), may also be taken to have reinforced the Wesleyan style of contemporary Methodism.

Over the decades which followed union, the hopes which had accompanied it were met with the disappointments of a reducing church membership, and a diminution in the sense that unity would enable the church to have a greater focus upon mission through new streamlined resources. In places where there was an over-abundance of Methodist chapels, local congregations could be unwilling to close in order to allow resources to be shared. These disappointments were, of course, accompanied by the societal changes of the twentieth century with a less benign view of organised religion being taken, and all within the context of the century's devastating wars. By the second half of the century, the Methodist Church - although united - was significantly smaller, and, in common with ecumenical partners, had less influence within society.

The location of authority

The manner in which leadership is exercised at national level has developed and changed since the union of 1932. Whilst the next chapter will consider this especially in relation to the possible introduction of the episcopate into British Methodism, two areas of development are worthy of comment here as they have affected the role played by those historically long-lasting and notably Methodist institutions - the Presidency and the Conference, both of which offer a sense of episcopate within the denomination.

Firstly, the role of the President of the Methodist Conference has been a focus for discussion within this chapter. The 1932 Deed of Union continued to see this as a role which was to be undertaken by an ordained presbyter, and although there have been proposals - most recently in 2010¹²⁰ - to extend the length of service of the President beyond one year, the position has continued to be largely symbolic, representative, and pastoral in nature, rather than executive. Nevertheless, the President with the considerable historical kudos associated with the position, continues to be a respected figure, and probably one which local Methodists see as the 'leader' of their denomination¹²¹.

It was, however, recognised that there was a need for someone else to act as a central focus for change, and the role of the Secretary of the Methodist Conference became increasingly important. The holder of this particular office, who was also an ordained minister, was someone who could not only provide guidance for Conference when it was in session, but also offer a focus for policy-development, a link with ecumenical partners, and a consistent source of thinking within Methodism for a longer period than allowed by the one-year

¹²⁰ The briefing paper "Leading and Presiding: developing the Presidency of the Conference" dated August 2010 provided different models for the Presidency, including a three year three person Presidency. The changes did not generally find favour with the Methodist people. Further discussion relating to this paper will follow in the next chapter and research phase.

¹²¹ These perceptions will be explored further in the questionnaires distributed as part of the research phase.

presidential rule. Rupert Davies with reference to a distinguished holder of the office from 1971-1982, Revd Kenneth Greet, commented that, "He has become the spokesman of Methodism in a way that used to be reserved to Presidents..."¹²²

The role of Secretary of Conference, which through a Conference decision in 2002 then gave way to the combined role of General Secretary of the Methodist Church and Secretary of Conference, has been key in forming policy for the church. The Church's Standing Orders include in the description of the General Secretary's role, that of being,

"the executive officer responsible for leading the mission and strategy of the Church...and in particular (he/she) shall be responsible for developing strategic management and the Church's vision of unity, mission, evangelism and worship."¹²³

It may be concluded even from this short 'job-description' extract, that the role is of great significance to the life of the Church. In most recent times the holder of the office of General Secretary has been instrumental in encouraging contemporary Methodism to consider its role as a church, and whether it should be looking to reestablish a greater sense of being a movement for mission. Due to the nature of the longer-term appointment of the General Secretary, initiatives such as this can, at least in theory, be worked-through by the Conference and people at a deeper level than would be possible from the initiative of a one-year President.

The other area of Methodist-life which has changed and is worthy of comment here is the work of the Conference. Whilst Conference continues to meet

¹²² Davies, "Since 1932", 389.

¹²³ Book III Standing Orders - contained within *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* Volume 2 2011, 370.

annually as the focus not only for the Methodist people's decision-making, but also its sense of connectedness, it was evident even in 1932 that an annual meeting was insufficient in offering oversight to the Church. The 1932 solution was the formation of the General Purposes Committee which was "authorised to act as the Conference between Conferences"¹²⁴, and which mirrored similar meetings within the constituting denominations which came together in that year. In 1994, after a couple of name changes, it was abolished in favour of the newly-formed Methodist Council.

The Council has quite wide-ranging terms of reference including "to keep in constant review the life of the Methodist church, to study its work and witness...to indicate what changes are necessary...to give spiritual leadership to the Church and to report annually to the Conference..."¹²⁵ The more detailed account of the responsibilities of the Council are outlined within the Standing Orders, and are met by a quarterly meeting of the Council together with the ongoing work of Connexional officers.

The make-up of the Council is also wide-ranging, with around seventy members including lay and ordained representatives from around the Connexion, as well as those in Connexional-leadership such as the General Secretary who is responsible for the agenda, the President and Vice President. Much of the work in preparation for the annual Conference is taken through the Council, which has a significant place in the consideration of Methodist policy.

Finally, the 1960's had seen the introduction of seven 'Divisions' which encompassed areas of church-life namely Home Missions, Overseas Missions, Social Responsibility, Finance, Ministries, Education and Youth and Property.

¹²⁴ Susan R Howdle's definition of the General Purposes Committee in Vickers (ed.), *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, 133.

¹²⁵ Book III Standing Orders - contained within *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* Volume 2, 351.

The Divisions were, at least in part, able to provide local churches and circuits with advice, to present reports to Conference, and to provide the sense that the connected Methodist Churches shared common ground on important matters of mission and ministry.

In the 1990's the Divisions were replaced by connexional team leaders having responsibility for leadership in four areas, Church Life, Church and Society, Inter-Church and other Relationships, and Administrative Services. John Munsey Turner, in commenting upon these changes made the telling point that "Links with circuits and local churches will be vital if any new connexional system is to work smoothly"¹²⁶.

The developments highlighted here serve to illustrate the point that the church is evolving in its structures, whilst also continuing to maintain the Presidency and the role of Conference, which have featured from the earliest beginnings of Methodism.

Consideration of these key developments will continue in the next chapter, and then within the empirical research which will firstly seek the views of lay people regarding leadership within the life of their Church, and then secondly will explore leadership in so detail with ordained Methodist presbyters who are themselves in positions of leadership. It will be interesting to see whether Turner's earlier comment finds an echo in contemporary opinion.

Episcopacy within Methodism

The next chapter will look more closely at reports relating to the possible introduction of the episcopacy into British Methodism which were written within the last twenty-five years, but in the period covered by the latter stages

¹²⁶ Turner, *Modern Methodism in England: 1932-1998*.

of this chapter, three reports laid the foundations for what was to come later, and will be briefly referred to here.

In 1978, the paper, "Methodism and Episcopacy" sought to set out "some of the implications of a possible future decision of the Conference to accept some form of episcopacy in British Methodism"¹²⁷. The short paper raised some key questions regarding episcopacy and Methodism including whether bishops would be introduced to represent the whole of Methodism or Districts or Circuits, how their introduction would affect the position of the Presidency, and should the episcopal appointments be into a permanent episcopate or be limited in duration.

The report was taken to the Methodist Conference of 1978, and from that further reports followed. In 1981 three pieces of work entitled 'Episcopacy in the Methodist Church'¹²⁸, were presented to the Conference. Firstly there was a brief account of the work of the President's Council on the question of episcopacy. Secondly, a report from the working party set up to consider the subject which went into detail about a Methodist understanding of episcopacy, and how the introduction of an episcopate might look within the British Methodist Church, was presented. Thirdly, the Faith and Order Committee provide comments upon the report of the working party.

These reports carefully considered questions relating to the possible introduction of an episcopate within Methodism, acknowledging that views would differ on the desirability of such an introduction and the location of episcopacy were it to be introduced. There is particular discussion about the role of Chairs - or at that time Chairmen - of District and the possible location of

¹²⁷ Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order Volume One 1933-1983. 155

¹²⁸ Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order Volume One 1933-1983. 151-181

episcopacy at District level, as well as presenting the majority view that it was at Circuit-level that the 'natural' Methodist location was to be found. As the report from the Faith and Order Committee put it:

“such an office was easily reconciled with an episcopal structure. The correct way forward would be to amalgamate circuits into new units, larger than the present circuits but smaller than districts, and so develop our system that the superintendent (and superintendency is an office rooted in Methodism) might be in a position to exercise the episcopal function of oversight...”¹²⁹

The reports also concluded that the acceptance of the historic episcopate was neither seen as a contradiction to Methodist doctrines, nor required by those doctrines, and that views would differ within Methodism on the question of whether such an introduction was desirable. A high level of consultation across the Connexion to achieve a consensus view was considered essential, and that - according to the Faith and Order Report - such a consultation should only be begun if 75% of Conference was in favour.

Finally, a further report from the Faith and Order Committee from 1982 addressed questions which had been posed in relation to its previous advice that no amendment to the Deed of Union would be required should the Methodist Church embrace the historic episcopate. In summary, the report concluded that as an order of bishops within Methodism would not “exhibit priestly gestures at odds with the Deed of Union or require any serious dislocation of our usage”¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order Volume One 1933-1983. 178

¹³⁰ Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order Volume One 1933-1983. 184

These reports and the Conference debates which instigated them took place within the context of ecumenical progress being made, and the implications of that progress in terms of relationships between episcopal and non-episcopal denominations. In particular, conversations with the Church of England were especially prominent in the debate over a possible episcopate within the Methodist Church.

The issues raised within these reports from the late 1970's and early 1980's were to be returned to in later reports which are considered in detail in the next chapter. In particular, they serve to highlight questions over the desirability, location and nature of an episcopate were it to be introduced. Questions which would continue to be within Methodist thinking for the following thirty years.

Conclusion

Since Wesley's death, Methodism has seen times of division and then union. Key elements within the division related to the nature and location of leadership, and at union it appeared to be possible to put these divisions on one side. Two generations on from 1932, the reasons for disunity would seem to have been subsumed by a Church which is Wesleyan in nature with a continuing respect for its Connexionalism as demonstrated by the work of the President and the Conference.

The Church has engaged in a process of changing these historical institutions since 1932, and part of the focus of this study is to ask the question whether such change has been helpful or unhelpful to Methodist leadership, and whether more substantial changes would have been beneficial. Debates over the episcopacy which emerged at the end of the 1970's/beginning of the 1980's continued to be present within the Church, and the next chapter offers a further exploration of more recent proposals concerning ways in which episcopate is

exercised, with especial focus upon the possibility of an episcopate being introduced.

Chapter 4 - Contemporary debates with British Methodism, an episcopal focus

Over the past fifteen years, the Methodist Church in Britain has engaged in the process of trying to define the nature of oversight, and this has included the publication of various papers outlining the roles associated with the different forms of ministry being exercised within the Church. Together with consideration being given to existing roles, the possibility of the introduction of an episcopacy has also been raised. This chapter will summarise those reports, and draw out some of the implications arising from them, together with responses to them. In this, contemporary Methodism's understanding of the location of episkope, and view towards the introduction of an episcopacy, may be elicited further.

The developments which took place during this period are relevant for the questions within this research. The Church was, at least to some extent, grappling with the inherited structures of Conference and President, and can be seen to be adding to these structures without removing them. The developments which will be described might be taken to be instrumental to some of the 'messiness' of Methodist leadership which is referred to later in Chapter 6. In particular, they bring together the historical nature of Methodism with its structures which remained in place, with the need to look at the contemporary context, including moves towards ecumenism, to see how leadership could be better-offered.

In 1997, the Methodist Conference saw the need for greater clarity regarding the issue of episcopacy within the context of ecumenical relationships and the move towards closer working. A Notice of Motion was adopted by the Conference which directed the Faith and Order Committee to "clarify British Methodism's understanding of episcopacy and report to the Conference of 1998". The

context of this Notice was that the task should be undertaken, “in order to enhance and develop discussions between the Methodist Church and the Church of England, the Church in Wales and the Scottish Episcopal Church.”¹³¹.

This context is important because its emphasis is not only upon an exploration of episkope or episcopacy as a development which might in itself be beneficial for the Methodist Church, but also as something which could assist in ecumenical dialogue with other denominations which had adopted episcopal structures - especially the Church of England.

The requested report served to summarise the Church’s position on episcopacy from the time of Methodist Union in 1932, and it was presented to, and adopted by, the Conference in 1998. The Conference then sought greater detail through commissioning a further report which is summarised in the following section.

*“Episkope and Episcopacy” 2002*¹³²

The report that was produced explored the Church’s understanding of oversight through an exploration of the historical place of episkope and episcopacy within Methodism, a summary of contemporary structures, and an analysis of episcopacy within the context of the World Church. The beginning point of the report was to highlight the differences between episkope and episcopacy, and to stress the presence of episkope, even in the absence of episcopacy.

In its next section, the Report produced an interesting examination of the places in which episkope may be found within the contemporary Methodist Church by considering communal, collegial and personal episkope, and in so doing

¹³¹ The Notice of Motion is quoted in the Methodist Church report *Episkope and Episcopacy*, 2.

¹³² The Methodist Church, *Episkope and Episcopacy*.

confirmed that episkope was exercised in different forms and locations within the Church.

Having identified the presence of episkope, there is a brief summary of previous Conference decisions with regard to the introduction of an episcopacy, which conclude that such an introduction would not be in contradiction to doctrinal standards and that whilst not being essential to the existence of the Church, would be likely to be a feature of a united church in the future.

A consideration of the situation with regard to episcopacy in other churches elsewhere in the world, some of which were linked to British Methodism, and others which were not, led the writers of the report to conclude that,

“it is clear that British Methodism's partners in the World Church have explored very similar questions to those addressed in the present report. They have come to a wide range of conclusions. Some have continued without bishops; some have introduced bishops, but not within the historic episcopate; yet others have accepted the historic episcopate.”

Amongst those with bishops but without the doctrine of an historic episcopate, is the American United Methodist Church, as noted in Chapter 2¹³³.

The report's final section carefully summarised the actions which British Methodism could take were it to introduce episcopacy. This summary stresses the place of the historical episcopacy as being important within future discussions because of the ecumenical context present. It is seen as essential that any move to embrace episcopacy, should not result in a structure which divides the Methodist Church from episcopal ecumenical partners, rather, it was argued, such a move should help in present and future moves towards greater unity.

¹³³ The Methodist Church, *Episkope and Episcopacy*, 21.

The nature of the Methodist Church as a connexional Church is strongly affirmed within the summary section, and the implications for this in terms of any suggested move towards a structure which would introduce a model of diocesan episcopacy with the authority of the Connexion being undermined, would be resisted. There is also discussion about the nature of possible episcopacy with a strong emphasis upon mission and pastoral care within a non-hierarchical structure. In other words, Methodist understanding of the role of a bishop would be that such a person should exercise ministry alongside others as a ministry of service.

From the above summary, three important points can be made. Firstly, if there was a move towards the development of an episcopacy, then it was considered essential that it should not hinder ecumenical moves with churches which already had an historic episcopacy. It would be reasonable to say that the greatest ecumenical developments at that time and since were with the United Reformed Church at local level through the foundation of local ecumenical partnerships, and with the Church of England through continuing talks locally and centrally towards more visible unity. It may be concluded that in the absence of an episcopacy within the United Reformed Church, it was the Church of England which was under particular consideration with regard to this point.

Secondly, the distinctive nature of Methodism as a connexional church was seen as being of great importance. Therefore if a local episcopacy was to be introduced - rather than terming connexional leaders 'bishops' - then this should not detract from the sense that the Methodist Church was a national and connected church. Decision-making and episcopal oversight should, therefore, not replace this sense of connectedness with a more localised "diocesan" sense being introduced.

Thirdly, and along similar lines to the second point, there was clearly an awareness that Methodists may - correctly or erroneously - view Bishops with a sense of suspicion as figures of authority who were separated from the 'ordinary people'. Hence the emphasis within the report on a servant-bishop approach needing to be taken.

In addition to the resolution that the Guidelines within the report should be seen as a summary statement of the position of the Conference with regard to episkope and episcopacy, the report also invited Conference to affirm its willingness in principle to "receive the sign of episcopacy on the basis of the Guidelines set out in this report"¹³⁴, and to seek comments on sections of the report from the Methodist Youth Conference, the Districts, Circuits, local churches and individual Methodists so that a report could be made to the Conference of 2002.

The Conference of 2002 discussed the issue of episcopacy within the Methodist Church, and requested a further report to define the kind of Bishop which might be introduced into British Methodism.

"What sort of bishops?: Models of episcopacy and British Methodism" 2003¹³⁵

As suggested above, this report had the task of clarifying 'the concrete models of episcopacy which may be deemed possible in the light of Methodist experience, understanding and practice of episkopé'. Its thrust, therefore, was not to question whether bishops should be appointed by the Church, but rather to outline different models of episcopacy and to seek a response relating to the kind of bishops which would be favoured by the Methodist people. In this, the report requested a response from Methodists to two questions¹³⁶ -

¹³⁴The Methodist Church, *Episkope and Episcopacy*, 28.

¹³⁵ The Methodist Church, *What sort of bishop? Models of episcopacy and British Methodism*.

¹³⁶The Methodist Church, *What sort of bishop? Models of episcopacy and British Methodism*, 32.

“Do you think that the findings of this report adequately articulate a Methodist understanding of episcopacy?”

Given that in Methodism the Conference acts like a ‘corporate bishop’, who should the specific representatives of that ‘corporate episkopé’ be?”

In not seeking to resolve the issue of whether or not the Methodist people actually wanted any kind of bishop at all, the report omitted to address a key issue within the psyche of Methodists at ‘chapel-level’. This was, however, an entirely reasonable omission for this report to make, because it was not charged by Conference with sampling Methodist public opinion on this matter, in part, no doubt, because of the view that a representative, rather than universally democratic, system of government was in place.

The report explored once again the context in which episkope was already in evidence in British Methodism, i.e. the Methodist Church’s place as an ecumenical partner, the history of previous decisions by the church, and the Church’s relations with Methodist and other denominations elsewhere within the World.

The report arrived at eleven alternative locations for episcopacy, together with an analysis of the rationale for those locations, and the arguments for and against each proposal. The eleven proposals were divided broadly into three groups as follows¹³⁷:-

¹³⁷ The Methodist Church, *What sort of bishop? Models of episcopacy and British Methodism*, 26-27.

Group A - The location of episcopacy within “Connexional-level” office holders
A The President of Conference as bishop
B The President of Conference and the General Secretary / Secretary of Conference as bishops
C The President of Conference, the General Secretary / Secretary of Conference and selected members of the Connexional Team bishops
D The President of Conference and selected Past-Presidents as bishops
E The President of Conference, the General Secretary / Secretary of Conference and selected Past-Presidents bishops
F The President of Conference, the General Secretary / Secretary of Conference, selected Past-Presidents, and selected presbyteral members of the Connexional Team as bishops

Group B - The location of episcopacy primarily at District
G Current Chairs of District as bishops
H Current Chairs of District together with a small number of superintendents who would relate to particular areas within a District as bishops
I Current Chairs of District together with a small number of superintendents each with a specialist focus of ministry as bishops

Group C - the location of episcopacy at Circuit level
J All Circuit superintendent ministers as bishops
K Circuit-boundaries to be revised to create ‘episcopal areas’, with Districts being disbanded. Superintendent ministers of the new episcopal areas would then become bishops

In the exploration of each of these proposals which followed, factors such as the number of bishops who would be created, the possible effect on ecumenical partners, and - most importantly within the context of this thesis - the message

that it transmitted about the location of episkope, were all considered. In this consideration, the complexity of Methodism, and the varied locations of episkope were evident.

For example, to adopt a proposal from Group A, would emphasise the place of the Methodist Conference as having a, if not the, central role of overseeing the Connexion, and fits with the current model of ordinations taking place at Conference. Amongst the negative features of these proposals were judged to be the small number of bishops which would be created - especially in the first few schemes, and the centralising of authority in a way that did not easily engage with local churches and circuits.

The proposals in Group B were deemed to provide the basis for the simplest model of transition, especially under the first scheme in which District Chairs became bishops. The following two proposals would then add to the first, by creating episcopal teams, and would also fit the pattern developing within District of having a Chair, and Assistant or Deputy Chair(s). In this Group, however, the 'firming up' of the District as the location for episcopacy, was also seen to offer a model which perhaps too closely followed a diocesan model, and which might then detract from Methodist Connexionalism.

Group C located episcopacy within Circuits. This was seen to most closely fit a Methodist understanding of the location of episkope, i.e, at Circuit level. However, both proposals within this group were seen as having the potential to be ecumenically insensitive. The first would create a large number of bishops - over 600 at the time the report was produced - in one go, and the second would additionally require major structural changes. Both, as with Group B, were seen as having the potential to detract from the role of the Connexion.

Having produced the range of options outlined above, the report then analysed what they would mean in terms of the Methodist Church and the Church in relation to other churches. Within this discussion, the two options in Group C are rejected on the grounds that whilst episkope at local level is most clearly seen to reside with the Superintendent, bishops would need to be seen within a Connexional rather than more localised Circuit context. Whilst it is recognised that superintendents are indeed connexional people, it would not appear to have been felt that they were necessarily the best-fit for that particular requirement.

Localised episcopacy was more realistically viewed as being possible through the schemes outlined in Group B which encompassed larger regional areas than smaller circuits. This was presented as having the advantage of pursuing established links, for example the existing relationships between District Chairs and diocesan bishops within the Anglican and Catholic denominations. By also appointing assistant or deputy chairs as bishops, then some of the problems experienced by Chairs whose Districts linked with a number of dioceses which overlap with one District, could be overcome through shared working.

It is then further suggested that to ensure that bishops were fundamentally connexional people, one of the proposals in Group B, could be combined with a proposal from Group A. Group A covers Connexional figures with two distinct roles - the President who acts a symbolic leader of Conference, and the General Secretary/Secretary of Conference - together with members of the Connexional team - who have the responsibility for the work on the Conference in relation to the Connexion.

These arguments, which saw an end to the proposals in Group C, led to a set of proposals being formulated for discussion within the wider Methodist Church. The proposals were essentially two-fold, and were presented as questions¹³⁸:-

“First,

do you think that the findings of this report adequately articulate a Methodist understanding of episcopacy?

This question invites a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer, though respondents may wish to add other comments.”

The second question asked where the representatives of the corporate episkope which was located in the Conference should be found. The options of the President, the General Secretary, and the District Chairs were offered. This was followed by a sub-question which outlined the options including combinations of office-holders such as the President and District Chairs as Bishops, or the President, General Secretary / Secretary of the Conference , District Chairs, and up to three Superintendents per District being so appointed.

The options within this section were very varied, and concluded with the choice of “none of the above”, which, interestingly, was introduced as a Motion at the 2005 Conference, rather than having been present within the original report. Responses to the report were requested by October 31st 2006, so that they could be presented to the 2007 Conference.

¹³⁸ The Methodist Church, *What sort of bishop? Models of episcopacy and British Methodism*, 32.

*The Faith and Order Committee and the Methodist Council Responses to the 'What sort of Bishops' Report - 2007*¹³⁹

Responses were drawn together into the above report and presented to the Conference on 2007. In very general terms, those responses appeared to represent a feeling from the Methodist people that the notion of episkope was not well-presented within the 2003 report, and that there was no real desire for the introduction of an historic episcopate. Given the significance of any proposed move towards the introduction of bishops, the number of responses to the paper were disappointing with only 45% of Districts, and 13.5% of Circuits responding at all. There were then 30 responses from individual churches and 50 from individuals.

In response the first question - *do you think that the findings of this report adequately articulate a Methodist understanding of episcopacy?*, most responses contained no answer to the question, with the remaining 40% approximately divided between those who did feel that an adequate articulation had been made, and those who did not.

The responses to the second question revealed a lack of support towards episcopacy with 56% of the responses rejecting the concept of any kind of bishop. Of the responses that did indicate a preference for one of the options within the 2003 report, the option of the President of Conference together with the District Chairs was identified by 16.5% of respondents, with very few being in favour of any of the other options.

A number of responses were in favour of one of the proposals omitted from the list of choices, which involved the re-forming of Circuits, and the appointment of Superintendents as bishops. Such responses appeared to be on the grounds

¹³⁹ The Methodist Church Faith and Order Committee and the Methodist Council, *Responses to the 'What sort of Bishops' Report'*.

that it was with superintendents that episkope - in particular personal episkope - was actually located. Thus in order to place episcopacy within the group that was most appropriate, and to do so without being insensitive to ecumenical partners by creating 600 bishops, the reorganisation of the circuits was necessary.

This would seem to represent a view which held the concept of episkope at local level to be important within Methodism, whilst also recognising the ecumenical context and not wishing to cause distress within it.

The responses, or lack of them, to the 2003 report are interesting and the 2007 report speculates on the reasons for the responses that were given, as well as those for non-responses from many areas within Methodism. In addition to factors which were present within the 2003 report itself, such as its length and complexity which made it difficult for local discussion, issues relating to the introduction of an episcopacy did appear to continue to be present for Methodists. Some of these were related to suspicion with regard to their leaders, and to the prospect of being subsumed into another denomination - in particular the Church of England. On this latter point, some responses pointed out that in the majority of local ecumenical partnerships, those partnerships were with United Reformed Churches which had no form of episcopacy, rather than Anglican Churches. Thus it was felt that consideration of the views of non-conformist ecumenical partners were not taken in to account.

There were also clear difficulties in relation to Conference as the accepted decision-making body within Methodism, and the local church. It was evident that the length of time that had been spent on discussion regarding the episcopacy at Conferences over a number of decades, and the resolutions which Conference had already agreed, were not known at local level. Therefore, there was suspicion about the possibility of bishops being introduced into the

church, without the views of the people having been obtained as to whether the church at large wanted bishops at all.

Other responses in favour of the inclusion of the President of Conference amongst the group of those to be included within an episcopacy, referred to that inclusion not being for life. The authors of the 2005 report saw this as failing to recognise that the historic episcopate had already been accepted by Conference as the model for episcopacy were it to be introduced.

This does, perhaps, reveal a division between the view of the historical episcopate as the route down which Methodism should go, and an alternative view which would see the role of a bishop as being for a purpose, and thus having an accompanying term of office. Furthermore, this view would suggest a sense of distrust of status, especially if that status continues past the point at which a job of work is being done. The small number of responses, whilst being greater than those to the 2001 report *Episkope and Episcopacy*, were interpreted in a number of ways, including¹⁴⁰:-

“as a relative lack of interest in the whole topic;
as an unwillingness or inability to get to grips with a complex report;
as an indication that, despite being sent out for consideration, the report was not actually offered for discussions in many Circuits and Districts...”

The report concluded by stating that:

“It may be that the discussions have highlighted a major gap between formal ecumenical discussion and where ‘the church on the ground’ often is.”¹⁴¹.

¹⁴⁰ The Methodist Church Faith and Order Committee and the Methodist Council (2007), 538.

¹⁴¹ The Methodist Church Faith and Order Committee and the Methodist Council (2007), 538.

The following recommendations were made¹⁴²:

“The Conference does not at this point take any steps towards embracing the historic episcopate.

No major discussion on this is entered into at the 2007 Conference.

It be recognised that it is inappropriate, in the light both of the Methodist Church’s Covenant relationship with the Church of England and its ongoing discussions with other ecumenical partners, not to envisage taking up this discussion again at some point in the future.

The Joint Implementation Commission be encouraged to continue its discussions in relation to episcopacy and to bring recommendations to the Conference at a future date.

Discussions undertaken within the Joint Implementation Commission continue to bear in mind other Anglican Churches in Britain, and their current relations with the British Methodist Connexion.”

After such lengthy reports and debate at the Methodist Conference it was, no doubt, disappointing for those closely involved in forwarding the argument for an historic episcopacy to have been met with a response which could be termed either negative or apathetic. Although it was, as stated above, seen as representing a gap between ecumenical thinking at connexional and local level, other conclusions might also be drawn which reflect more upon a British Methodist wariness towards authority, than a conclusion about ecumenism.

Whilst Conference reports, debates and resolutions provide evidence of a move in the direction of considering the introduction of an episcopacy, that direction did not appear to be shared by Methodist people. The reasons for this are open to some speculation, and will be the subject for interview and questionnaire research later in the study, but it might be reasonable to suggest some

¹⁴²The Methodist Church Faith and Order Committee and the Methodist Council (2007), 540.

alternative reasons for the absence of support for the proposition that the Church should move down the route of historical episcopacy:

- there may be a distrust of titles and structures which are perceived as Anglican. Despite the use of terms such as 'conversation's and 'covenants' within the literature relating to the ongoing dialogue with the Church of England, moves towards greater unity may be seen as being more along the lines of a 'take-over' by a larger church, than a mutual coming together of two equal partners. If this view is prevalent, then the adoption of bishops by the Methodist Church could be seen as a step along the road to being subsumed within a larger denomination
- The common perception of a bishop as an authority figure, rather than a serving figure may be prevalent. Although the reports stressed the connexional rather than diocesan nature of any Methodist episcopacy, the common perceptions of Methodist people may see bishops as being authoritarian and at an elevated status to ground-level Methodists. This perception may not have been helped by the proposition that an episcopacy would be historical, and a separate order of ministry from the presbyteral ministry.
- Methodists at local level simply saw no need for another level of oversight.
- There is a gap present between Methodist people, Conference decisions and Connexional direction. This may be witnessed not only in the sense of distrust present within the first point, but may also be evidenced by a lack of connection with the Connexion. In other words, whilst decisions of Conference are accepted by the whole Methodist people, and such acceptance is in actuality reasonably obedient, there remains a sense that what happens at Connexional-level doesn't necessarily impact upon local Methodism.

David Chapman¹⁴³ in his summary of the contemporary ecumenical relationship between the Methodist Church and the Church of England in particular, draws attention to some of the above points within the context of the understanding that Methodists have of episkope. In particular, he makes the argument that whilst Methodists are beginning to see that episkope is exercised in a personal, collegial and communal way,

“episkope in Methodism has mostly been exercised communally, even in those Methodist churches endowed with bishops.”

He goes on to suggest that Methodists’ suspicion of investing authority in individuals - and one suspects that this is a key area within the debate of bishops - needs to be tempered with

“a greater awareness of the weaknesses of communal forms of authority, which may be no less susceptible to impeding the Holy Spirit than individuals.”

Whilst episkope is present, and clearly can be present, without episcopacy, Chapman confirms that the debate over the introduction of the latter may provide useful indicators regarding the feelings, and indeed prejudices, of Methodists about the location of authority and oversight.

The examination of the historical and contemporary developments regarding leadership and oversight within this, and the preceding chapters, serves to provide the background and context for the research questions within this study. There have been clear attempts, as evidenced in this chapter, to explore the nature of leadership within the Church, and to offer alternative models of episkope, including the possible introduction of an episcopate. At times a divide between the Connexion and the local church has been evident, and this has especially been noted with regard to the possibility of bishops being part of the Church’s leadership.

¹⁴³ Chapman, ‘Methodism and the Future of Ecumenism’, 461.

The research question relates directly to this context and the issue of whether existing structures are 'fit for purpose'. The next sections will widen this question through congregational research which looked at the degree to which local Methodists have a knowledge of Connexional structures; whether they are considered to be relevant to the local church; and how the introduction of bishops might be received by local Methodists.

Chapter 5 - Empirical Research I - asking the people

Method

The empirical research content for this dissertation consisted of two distinct elements - questionnaires which were distributed to four Methodist congregations, and interviews which were held with eleven Methodist presbyteral ministers who were in positions of leadership beyond the local church.

Questionnaires

The purpose of the questionnaires was three-fold within the context of this research.

- Firstly, it was considered to be important to investigate the degree of knowledge that local Methodists had about those in leadership within their Church.
- Secondly, the views of Methodists concerning the influence of other structures of Methodism outside their own churches were sought.
- Finally, views were sought over the issue of episcopacy.

Behind these questions was the desire to explore the way in which being a Connexional church continued to be influential upon Methodist people. This is an important question if the Church holds that Connexionalism matters, and so assessing the knowledge of Methodists about people in, and structures of, leadership, was viewed as valuable. It was hoped that the information gathered would serve as an indicator concerning the significance or structures beyond the local church upon the everyday worshipping lives of Methodists.

In Chapter 4 it was suggested that there was a mis-match between Conference decisions on episcopacy and the views of local Methodists. The questionnaires were designed to arrive at an answer to this question by explicitly asking

whether or not respondents were in favour of the introduction of bishops, and where the episcopate should be situated were it to be introduced.

Questionnaires were distributed to four congregations in March 2012¹⁴⁴. The congregations were chosen to represent different demographic and geographic areas within London and the South-East. Two town congregations - one on the outskirts of London and the other on the south coast, one village congregation - in rural East-Sussex, and one city congregation in London, were invited to take part through contact with their ministers.

To ease distribution and return of questionnaires, the ministers of the different congregations were known to the author of this study. They were contacted by letter or email, and following their agreement for their congregations to participate, questionnaires were distributed through them. They were given the option whether to select someone within the congregation to serve as contact point for the collection of the completed questionnaires, or return them themselves.

The questionnaires were designed to be quick and straightforward to complete, and thus were confined to two sides of an A4 sheet. The questions were closed in nature, either requiring a factual answer, or an opinion to be expressed through the use of rating scales. The absence of open-ended questions was designed to encourage completion, and to enable quantitative analysis of the results to take place. This was to be in contrast with the interviews where a qualitative approach was adopted.

It was stressed that the questionnaire was confidential, although there was an option at the end to include the name and telephone number of any respondent who was willing to be interviewed should the researcher decide to include

¹⁴⁴ Questionnaire included as Appendix 1

congregation-members in the interview stage¹⁴⁵. The questionnaires were accompanied by the Information Sheet required by King's College.

It is not possible to provide an exact percentage return-rate for the questionnaires as the total given out was not recorded in every case. However it is possible to provide precise information about the number of questionnaires returned when compared with the size of the usual Sunday congregation in which they would have been distributed. This size was known from one of the questions in the first section of the questionnaire, and is indicated in Table 1.

	Size of congregation	Number of questionnaires returned
Coastal Town	41-60	41
Village	0-20	15
London Suburban town	41-60	46
City	21-40	12
Total		114

Table 1 - total of returned questionnaires for each Church

It can be noted from the table, that in three of the four churches, the number of questionnaires returned was close to the reported usual size of the congregation. It was only in the case of the 'city' church that a markedly smaller return was noted. The reasons for this were not known, but it was known that in the city church the collection of the questionnaires was undertaken by a church steward, rather than through the minister.

¹⁴⁵ Although this option was available, follow-up interviews with questionnaire respondents were not held

Questionnaire Results

Section 1

The first section was concerned with the local church at which the respondent worshipped, and was included to enable the geographic and demographic nature of that church to be identified as part of the later analysis. It is not necessary to provide an analysis of the data from this section at this stage.

Section 2 - Those in leadership

The first two questions in this Section were designed to elicit information about the knowledge held in relation to those in leadership, and a view about their level of influence within the life of the local church.

Firstly, respondents were asked whether the names of those in leadership positions were known to them. They were not asked to provide the names of those in leadership, but rather to indicate on a three point scale whether the person concerned was definitely known by name; or the name would need to be checked; or the name was definitely not known.

It was felt that if respondents had specifically been asked to provide names in this section, then they might have been encouraged to research the names, rather than to go with their first response to the questions. Knowledge regarding the identity of their own church minister, the Superintendent Minister of their Circuit (who in some cases may have been the same person as their own minister), the Chair of their District, the President of the Methodist Conference, and General Secretary of the Methodist Church, was sought. The results are outlined below in Table 2.

It should be noted that as not all respondents chose to answer all or any parts of some questions, the raw scores in this results section will not always equal the same totals in each case.

	Yes I definitely know the name	I think I know the name, but would need to check	No I definitely don't know the name
Church Minister	97% (110)	2% (2)	1% (1)
Circuit Superintendent	95% (104)	1% (1)	4% (5)
Chair of District	44% (46)	29% (30)	28% (29)
President of Conference	16% (17)	19% (20)	66% (71)
General Secretary	7% (8)	14% (15)	79% (86)

Table 2 - knowledge of the names of those in leadership positions

These results are then presented graphically in Chart 1.

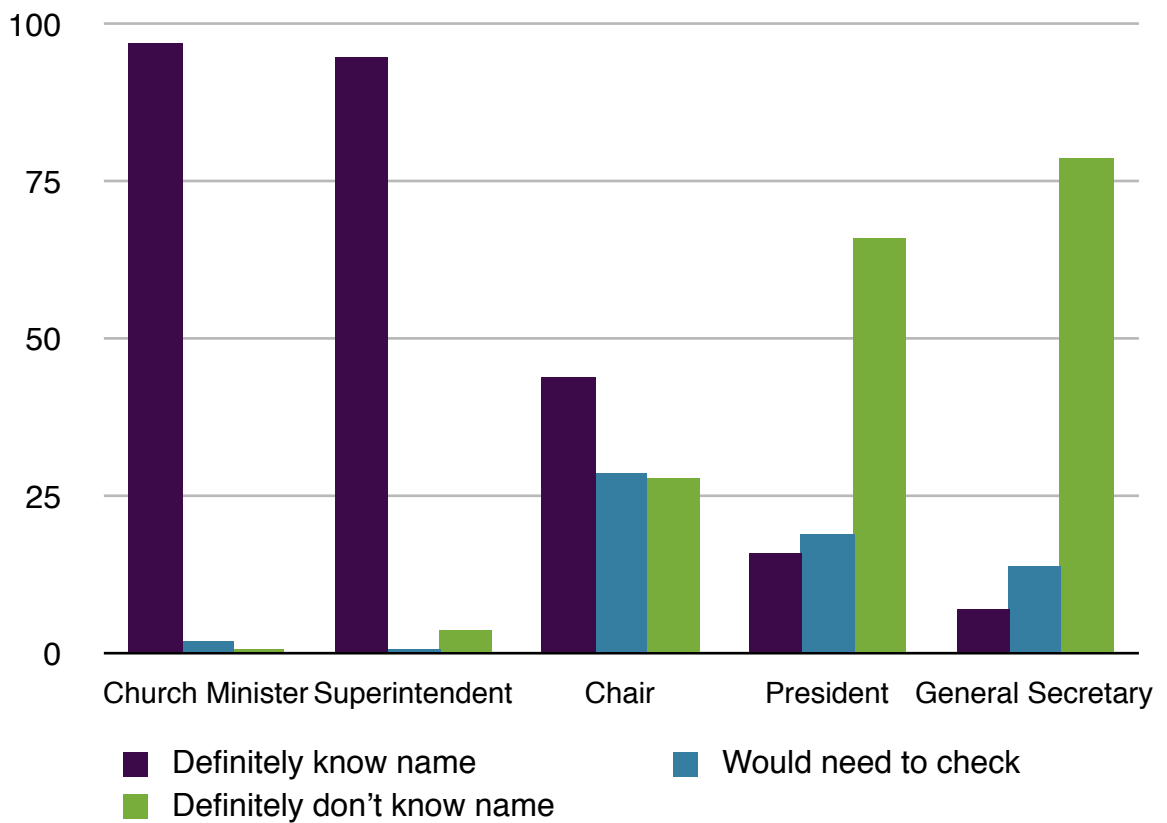


Chart 1 - knowledge of the names of those in leadership positions

The second question in Section 2 related to the perceived influence of those in leadership. The resultant ratings are presented in Table 3. Views were sought

utilising a five-point rating scale which requested a response indicating that the person was 'very influential' through to 'not at all influential'.

	1 = very influential	2	3	4	5 = not at all influential
Minister	70% (76)	21% (23)	6% (6)	4% (4)	0
Superintendent	60% (64)	23% (24)	9% (10)	4% (4)	4% (4)
Chair of District	4% (4)	27% (26)	32% (31)	17% (17)	20% (20)
President of Conference	3% (3)	9% (9)	26% (25)	26% (25)	36% (35)
General Secretary	3% (3)	9% (9)	20% (20)	23% (23)	44% (44)

Table 3 - the perceived influence of those in leadership positions

These results are then shown in graph form in Chart 2.

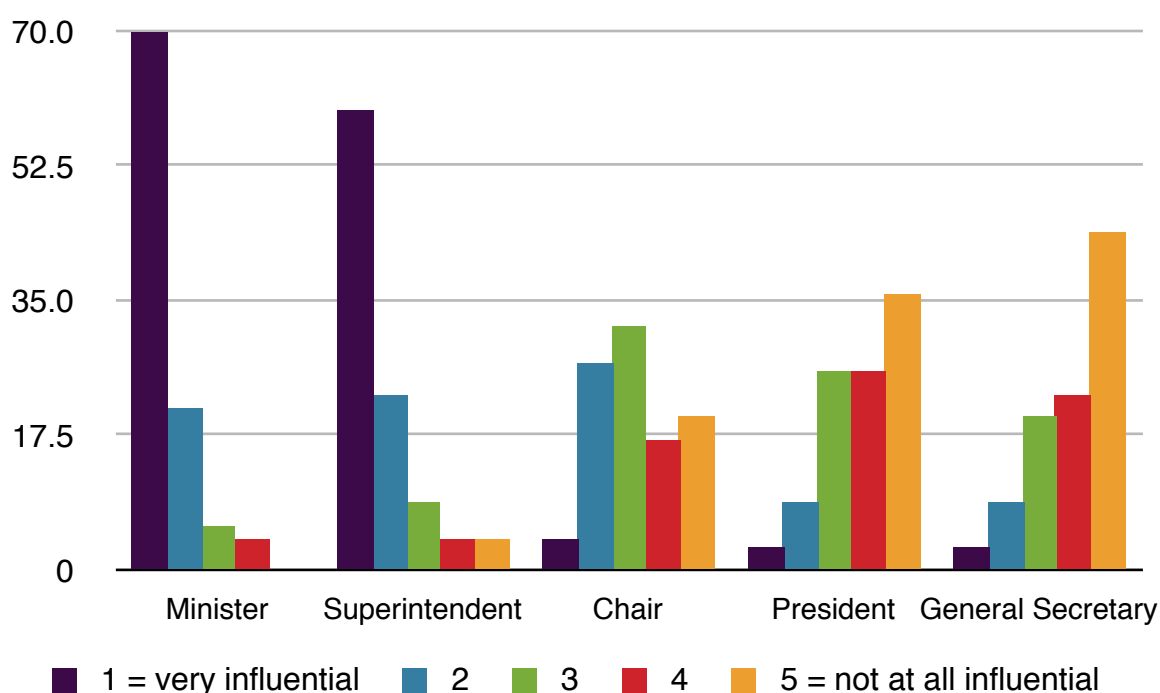


Chart 2 - the perceived influence of those in leadership positions

Discussion regarding these results will follow at a later stage in this chapter, but it is evident, and perhaps not too surprising, that the further away from the

local church situation a leader was positioned, the less well-known was their identity, and the less their perceived influence.

Section 3 - the influence of meetings

The questions then turned to the question of the perceived influence that meetings within British Methodism had upon the local church, with respondents being asked whether particular meetings were viewed - again on a five-point scale - as being from 'very influential' to 'not at all influential'. The results of this question are given below.

	1 = very influential	2	2	3	5 = not at all influential
Church Council Meeting	64% (69)	27% (29)	7% (8)	0	1% (1)
Circuit Meeting	29% (29)	34% (35)	26% (27)	9% (9)	4% (4)
District Synod	4% (4)	18% (18)	31% (30)	28% (27)	18% (17)
Methodist Conference	5% (5)	20% (20)	28% (27)	26% (25)	22% (21)

Table 4 - the perceived influence of different meetings

These results are presented in graph form in Chart 3, below.

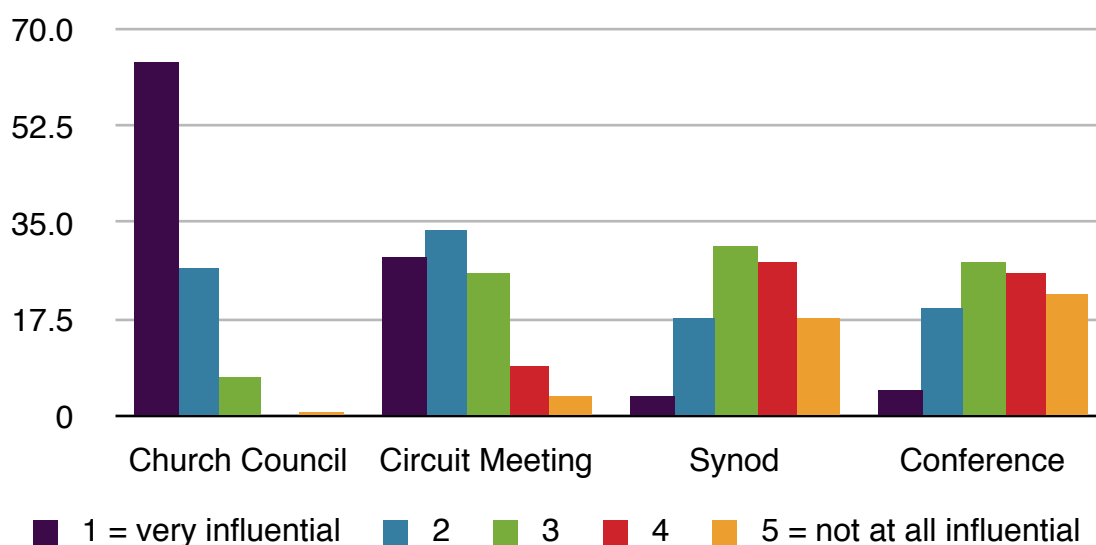


Chart 3 - the perceived influence of meetings upon the life of the local church

Given the results above, which suggest a sense of 'disconnect' between local church people and Methodist leaders and meetings at District and Connexional levels, the additional questions that were included within Section 3 relating to the respondents' involvement in meetings beyond their local church were used to form a subset of respondents. The subset was made up of those who had attended wider meetings, to see whether there was a greater sense of influence from those meetings amongst these respondents. Attendance at meetings beyond those of the local church is given for each of the four congregations in Table 5.

	Circuit Meeting	Synod	Conference
Coastal town	19	6	3
Village	6	2	1
London suburban town	22	9	1
City	8	3	0
Total	55	20	5

Table 5 - the number of respondents from the four churches who had attended meetings beyond their local Church council

When the ratings for this particular group were analysed the following results were obtained:

	1 = very influential	2	2	3	5 = not at all influential
Church Council Meeting	81% (44)	15% (8)	4% (2)	0	0
Circuit Meeting	38% (20)	40% (21)	19% (10)	4% (2)	0
District Synod	6% (3)	25% (13)	38% (20)	25% (13)	6% (4)
Methodist Conference	9% (5)	21% (11)	30% (16)	28% (15)	22% (21)

Table 6 - the perceived influence of different meetings as indicated by the subgroup of respondents who had attended meetings beyond their local Church Council

In order to analyse the two sets of results, the average ratings given to different meetings by those who had attended meetings beyond their local church, and those who had not, were compared. Given the nature of the rating scale, the lower the score, the higher the perceived level of influence. If a respondent did not rate one or more of the meetings in their questionnaire, then all results were ignored for that respondent. Chart 4 presents the results of this analysis.

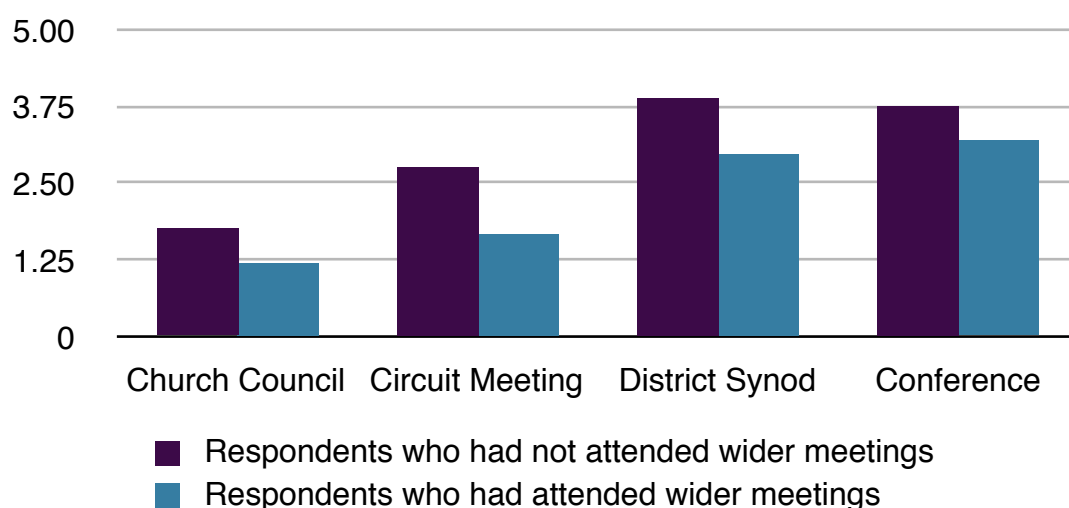


Chart 4 - the perceived value of meetings, a comparison between those who had, and those who had not, attended meetings beyond their local Church Council

Each meeting was therefore rated more positively in terms of the influence of that meeting in cases where respondents had been involved beyond the level of their local church.

Section 4 - Bishops

Given the reports and debates referred to in the previous chapter regarding the possible introduction of an episcopal order of ministry, two questions on this topic were asked within the questionnaire. Firstly, respondents were asked whether they saw the possible introduction of bishops into the Methodist Church as being desirable, and secondly, if bishops were to be introduced, where episcopacy should be located. The results from these two questions are below:

Location of church	Yes	No	Don't know
Coastal town	10% (4)	54% (21)	36% (14)
Village	23% (3)	62%(8)	15% (2)
London suburban town	27% (12)	49% (22)	24% (11)
City	8% (1)	67% (8)	25% (3)
Total	18% (20)	54% (59)	28% (30)

Table 7 - responses to the question “Do you think it would be a good idea if there were bishops in the Methodist Church in Britain? Results as percentages with raw scores in brackets.

The total percentages are presented in chart form in Chart 5.

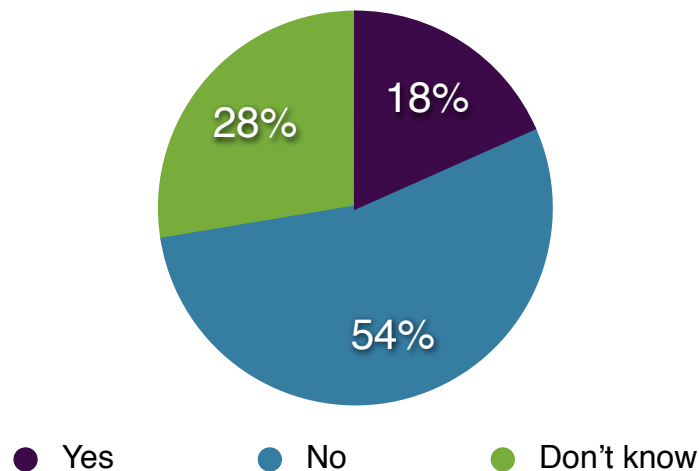


Chart 5 - responses to the question: “Do you think it would be a good idea if there were bishops in the Methodist Church in Britain?

The follow-up question concerned with the location of episcopacy did not require an affirmative answer to be given to the first question in order to give a view regarding the second. Respondents were invited to circle one or more of the options, and a number of them therefore gave more than one location where, in their view, episcopacy might reside. In view of this, the figures in Table 8 represent raw scores, rather than percentages.

	Circuit Superintendent	Chair of District	President of the Methodist Conference	General Secretary of the Methodist Church	Don't have a view
Coastal town	3	6	7	1	20
Village	2	5	0	0	7
London suburban town	14	4	9	1	16
City	1	3	1	0	5
Total	20	18	17	2	48

Table 8 - answers in response to the question “If the Methodist Church did have bishops, who do you think should be a bishop?” Responses given as raw scores.

These raw scores for all churches when added together are then presented in graph form below in Chart 6.

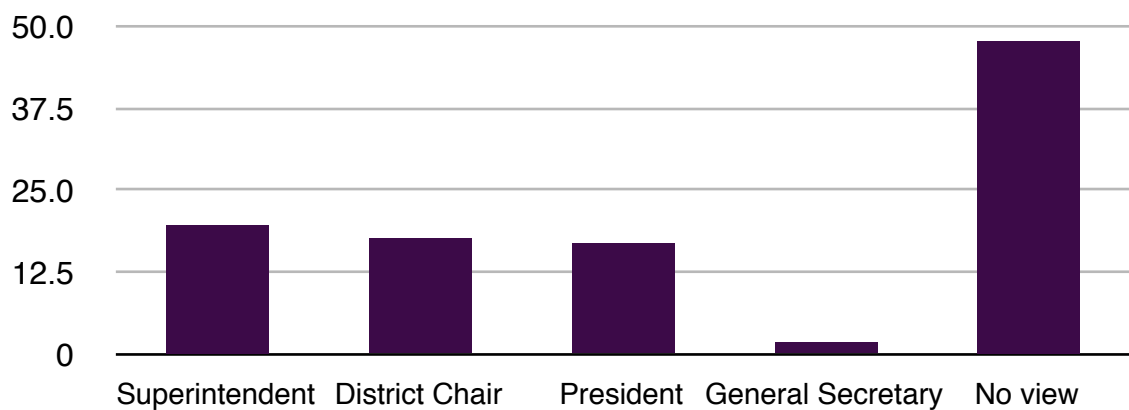


Chart 6 - answers in response to the question “If the Methodist Church did have bishops, who do you think should be a bishop?” Responses given as raw scores.

Discussion

The discussion concerning the results will be offered on the Sections 2-4 where the results have been outlined above.

Section 2 - Those in leadership

It was evident from the results of question 2.1 that there was a high level of knowledge expressed regarding the names of the minister of the Church at which respondents worshipped, and the superintendent of the Circuit in which that Church was to be found. Only 1% of respondents indicated that they definitely did not know the name of their own minister, with 4% replying similarly regarding the Circuit Superintendent. In contrast, however, as those in leadership became 'more distant' from the local church, then their identity also became less well-known.

As part of the ongoing debate concerning the length of term to be served by a President of the Methodist Conference, it is frequently argued that with a one-year Presidency, there is little opportunity for those inside, let alone outside, Methodism to know the identity of the holder of that Office. This argument would appear to find support within the research where 66% of respondents definitely did not know the name of the President. The Office of President formally begins in June or July at the Methodist Conference, with the identity of that year's President being known a year in advance. As the survey was carried out in the following Spring, it could not be argued that the identity of the President at the time of the questionnaire had only recently become known.

The General Secretary of the Methodist Church is, as has been argued in previous chapters, a leading role within contemporary Methodism. In view of this, definite knowledge of the identity of the holder of this Office being at only 4%, with 79% definitely not knowing the identity could be taken, at the least, as a reason to look with care at how communication within the Church is enabled.

Section 3 - Meetings

As with the results of Section 2, the perceived influence of meetings upon the life of the local church reduced with the 'distance' of that meeting from the local church. The Church Council and Circuit Meeting were therefore viewed as being more influential than the District Synod or Methodist Conference.

When the subgroup of those who were more involved in the wider church were considered, then all meetings - including their local Church Council - were more highly viewed in terms of levels of influence. Again, this is not perhaps surprising as it may be surmised that to opt to be involved in structures which are at a level beyond that of the local church, would suggest that some degree of value is being assigned to the meetings which accompany such involvement.

Throughout this dissertation, however, there has been a running theme relating to Methodism as a 'Connexional Church', i.e a Church which sees itself as being connected by its Circuit, District and Connexional structures, with the annual Methodist Conference representing an exemplar of the working of such a model. The results of Sections 2 and 3 would suggest that the view from the level of the local Church, however, is that the influence of people and meetings at District and Connexional level is, at the least, not great.

This would seem to raise questions about the way in which contemporary Methodism is to encourage a sense of connexionalism within this context, and may suggest at the very least, that communication needs to be considered as an area for development. This issue will be considered further when the Interview Section of the empirical research is looked at.

Section 4 - Bishops

When the results of the ‘gut feeling’ question regarding the possible introduction of an episcopate into British Methodism is considered, over 50% of respondents gave their view that there should be no such introduction, with only 18% responding to the suggestion in an affirmative way. With a further 28% indicating that they did not know whether or not such a development would be good or bad, the questionnaire results failed to find grass-roots support for the introduction of an episcopal order of ministry into contemporary Methodism.

The size of the “don’t know” response indicated a potential lack of success in getting this subject debated across the Methodist Church, despite the number of times that it had been raised at the Methodist Conference, and the distribution of discussion papers such as those referred to in the last chapter. Engagement with the issue of episcopacy within Methodism did not appear to be great amongst the congregations sampled for this study.

In view of this lack of enthusiasm, it is not, perhaps, surprising that the follow-up question regarding the location of an episcopal ministry were one to be introduced, resulted in 46% of responses indicating ‘no view’ as to where that location might lie. There was very little difference between the results for the first three options - i.e. Circuit Superintendent, Chair of District and President of the Conference, with only two people indicating the location of episcopacy as residing with the General Secretary as an option.

There were, however, differences in view between the different churches on this question. Within the suburban town, the Superintendent was seen as the ‘best fit’, although even here the ‘do not have a view’ option still achieved a greater vote. Without further research, it is difficult to draw conclusions from this

question other than to indicate that the introduction of an episcopal order received little enthusiasm within the survey.

Conclusion

The results of the questionnaires provide evidence of the views of Methodist people in relation to the questions being raised within the dissertation. In this they serve to reinforce a number of points that might be made regarding contemporary Methodist opinion, and which can be summarised as follows:

- there was evidence that local Methodists had little knowledge of the identity of those in positions of leadership at Connexional level within the Church. This applied equally to the President of Conference and the General Secretary
- there was evidence that local Methodists did not feel that meetings at District or Connexional level were particularly influential upon the life of their church
- there was evidence that the introduction of an episcopacy into contemporary Methodism was not a move that would receive support
- there was no clearly preferred location for such an introduction, were it to happen.

These conclusions are important within the context of a Church which desires to see itself as being connected. Leadership at reasonably local level within Districts, and more distantly situated within the Connexion, was neither able to be identified with named people, nor considered to be influential upon the life of the local Church. In relation to the introduction of the episcopacy which has been the subject of considerable debate and reporting over recent years, little of this debate appeared to have impinged upon the thinking of the local congregations sampled as part of this study.

These matters will receive further consideration within the following chapter which relates to the outcome of the interviews that were held, and then in the concluding section.

Chapter 6 Empirical Research II - asking the presbyters

This primary purpose of this chapter is to consider the results of the interviews that were conducted as part of the research phase for this project. In addition, however, comment will also be made on correspondence within the Methodist Recorder which arose during this stage of the research, and which relates directly to the issues being discussed in this chapter.

Interviews were arranged with eleven Methodist presbyteral ministers who could be divided into three groups according to the offices that they held within the Church:

- Group 1 - Circuit Superintendent Ministers - four interviews held
- Group 2 - Chairs of District - four interviews held
- Group 3 - Ministers holding Connexional office - three interviews held

For the purposes of this study each interviewee has been assigned a letter-code so that the different quotations used in this chapter can be linked with particular interviewees. This is designed not to adversely affect issues of anonymity which are referred to later. The code letters were assigned as follows:

Circuit Superintendent Minister 1 -	Letter A
Circuit Superintendent Minister 2 -	Letter B
Circuit Superintendent Minister 3 -	Letter C
Circuit Superintendent Minister 4 -	Letter D
Chair of District 1 -	Letter E
Chair of District 2 -	Letter F
Chair of District 3 -	Letter G
Chair of District 4 -	Letter H
Minister holding Connexional Office 1 -	Letter I
Minister holding Connexional Office 2 -	Letter J
Minister holding Connexional Office 3 -	Letter K

Wherever quotations are used, the relevant code letter denoting the interviewee who gave the quotation will be noted in brackets following the quote.

Group 1 - Superintendent Ministers

Those in the first group were selected in a semi-randomized manner. Contact was made with the six Superintendent ministers within the south-east section of the London District with an invitation being given to take part in the interview process. Of the six approached, two agreed to take part.

In view of the interest within the study in the changing shape of Circuits, it was felt to be important to include the views of a Superintendent minister who had experience of working within a newer large Circuit. As this was outside the experience of either of the volunteers, a Superintendent minister in the South-East District who was working within a large and newly-formed Circuit was invited to take part.

Finally, a fourth Superintendent was approached because it was known that he had a particular interest in leadership within the Church, and had previously held significant Connexional office.

Group 2 - Chairs of District

The second group included all three District Chairs in the London District, together with the Chair of the South-East District. Approaches were made by letter, and all four agreed to be interviewed.

Group 3 - Ministers holding Connexional office

Approaches were made to four presbyteral ministers who had Connexional responsibility, having either been appointed by the Connexion and being members of the Connexional Team, or having been appointed by the Methodist Conference, and being based at the head office for British Methodism at

Methodist Church House in London. Those invited to take part were selected because of the leadership roles which they held. Three accepted the invitation, and one was unable to accept due to personal circumstances.

Of the eleven interviewees, three had experience of holding the office of President of the Methodist Conference, and a wealth of experience of leadership in different forms was present amongst the interviewees.

In terms of gender, of the eleven interviewees, three were female and eight male. Whilst not being a balanced gender representation it is probably a reasonable representation of the gender of those in positions of leadership within the Methodist Church. For example, in the London District in 2012-2013, of the thirty-eight Circuit Superintendents, ten were female, and twenty-eight male.

Location and structure of interviews

Interviews took place between June and October 2012 in a location of the interviewees' choice. In most cases this was an office where they were based, and in two cases their homes. In each case the interviewee agreed to an audio recording being made of the interview. A letter detailing the areas of discussion for the interview was sent in advance¹⁴⁶, together with the Consent Form required as part of King's College ethical approval arrangements.

Each interview lasted no longer than 45 minutes, and varied from 20 minutes to 45 minutes in duration. Over 57,000 words were recorded and then transcribed from the interviews. One of the interviews is included as a sample at Appendix 3.

¹⁴⁶ Letter included as Appendix 2

Unlike the questionnaire part of the empirical research, the interviews were qualitative in nature. In his comments upon this methodological approach, Philip Richter notes that the researcher will “undertake a modest number of extensive, probing interviews, rather than a large-scale “number-crunching” survey.”¹⁴⁷ In this research, the number of interviewees was modest, but those interviewed, especially at District and Connexional level, held significant roles within the Church, and were invited to take part because of the wealth of insight which could be offered from their perspectives.

The *interview guide approach* was used as the preferred method for the conducting of the interviews. This allowed a degree of structure through the preparation of topics to be covered, whilst enabling a conversational style which can elicit further information in response to the questions and answers.¹⁴⁸ The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for deviation from the questions and the ordering of those questions to be varied. Given the peer-relationship between interviewer and some of the interviewees, it was felt that this format would allow for the areas that needed to be covered to be covered, but in a conversational rather than interrogative style. The guidance offered by Scott Thumma was found to be helpful:

“Be yourself, but stick to your agenda, ask questions, and then listen uncritically and with encouragement. This is especially important when you know the person you are interviewing.”¹⁴⁹

Although the interviews were wide-ranging, their focus was upon three distinct areas:

- leadership within the life of the Circuit
- leadership within the Connexion

¹⁴⁷ Writing as a co-author in Cameron et al, *Studying Local Churches*, 21.

¹⁴⁸ Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, *Research Methods in Education*, 353.

¹⁴⁹ Thumma, ‘Methods for Congregational Study’, 205.

- episcopacy

Questions were prepared in advance for each of these areas. In each interview the same areas were covered, but the questions were not necessarily asked in their prepared-form as answers to them in a number of cases had already been provided in responses to other questions.

As might be expected, the areas in which the ministers operated tended to influence their knowledge and interest in the areas being enquired into. For example, whilst Superintendent ministers had a good understanding of how local Circuits and Districts operated, they did not claim to have the same degree of knowledge about the operation of the Connexion, and in some cases were explicit in expressing their lack of knowledge. The absence of knowledge or interest in a particular area within the study was, in itself, felt to be informative.

Anonymity

In view of the prominence within Methodism of those involved in the interview stage, and the possible ease with which they might be identified from, for example, their job designation and gender, anonymity was viewed as being of significant importance. Therefore where direct quotes are used from the transcripts, any identifying comments have been removed. In general quotes are entirely unattributable.

Each of the three broad interview-areas will now be considered in some detail. The questions which were prepared for the interviews are noted under each sub-heading, and were designed to elicit the views of interviewees on the key questions within the research. At Circuit-level, therefore, the insight of Superintendent Ministers into the degree to which the Connexional organisation impinged locally was felt to be important, together with their thoughts on changes in the nature of Circuits.

At District and Connexional level the same topics were raised, but the focus was more upon the wider structures of the Church and the key question of whether inherited models of leadership, albeit modified over the years, continued to be effective. It was hoped that personal experiences of working within a Connexional Church at local and national level would be covered by the different conversations.

Leadership within the Circuit

Four questions were prepared within this area, but in the case of each area for questioning, not all the questions were used in the exact form noted here, and conversation was allowed to follow answers that were given.

- To what extent, would you say, do local churches see themselves as congregational and to what extent connexional, and are there recent factors at play in this?
- What understanding is there at local church level of the nature of being a connexional church?
- There are changes taking place in the structure of local Circuits - including the creation of very large Circuits, together with the continuing of very small Circuits. What effects on Circuit and District leadership do you feel is likely because of this increasingly varied Circuit-size?
- Together with the variation in Circuit-size is the added ecumenical dimension of united areas¹⁵⁰. In your view, what effects is this development likely to have?

There was a general, but not universal, view that Methodist congregations were becoming less Connexional in nature and more congregational. However, each interviewee who subscribed to this view also indicated that it was difficult to verify, except by anecdotal evidence. For example, Superintendent ministers drew attention to evidence such as poor attendance at Circuit services¹⁵¹, and other Circuit events.

When this was considered in more detail, it was seen by some as being evidence of other factors at play within the life of the Church and society. The lessening of denominational-identity was cited by several respondents as being important with the argument being made by one that:

¹⁵⁰ In a number of areas United Areas have been created mainly between Methodist Circuits and the local URC churches. The introduction of such areas raises issues of oversight and local supervision.

¹⁵¹ A united service arranged within a Circuit and intended to be attended by all local Methodist Churches

“...people don’t see themselves as a Methodist as opposed to any other kind of Christian, they’ve found a church that either works for them because of their cultural background or geographically or because they like the style of worship...” (G)

This perceived change in denominational loyalty therefore led to a lessening of understanding and/or appreciation of Methodist systems. At times it was acknowledged that this could cause problems when, for example, the Connexion rather than the local church was key in decision-making, as in the stationing of ministers. In these situations difficulties had occurred where some within the local congregation felt that they should have a greater say in a process which was not within their local control.

There was, however, also a consistent view that local Methodist churches did actually continue to see themselves as operating as part of a larger organisation - whether that be the local Circuit or the District or the Connexion. It was noted that in areas such as the management of property, the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults, and the general trusteeship of the local Church, then there was an appreciation of being a connected congregation even if the responsibilities of such a connection were not necessarily, or generally, appreciated.

One of the respondents from the London District reflected upon the policy which had been taken to emphasise this sense of belonging to a larger entity - in this case the District - than the local church. It was felt that there had been success in enabling such a sense of identity to be ‘owned’ by London churches.

One respondent who had held the office of President of the Methodist Conference reflected upon the experience of travelling around the Connexion during the year of office:

“..for the President of the Methodist Conference to come to your church and Circuit..seems quite...an important thing and particularly if that person then points out, “You might only be 30 people here but actually we’re part of a worldwide family of 70 million Methodists!” and people are pretty positive about that.”” (I)

Furthermore, although interviewees did see increasing congregationalism as a feature of contemporary Methodism there was a desire not to over-state this. One interviewee questioned, “whether it (*Methodism*) was ever really a wonderfully connexional circuit- minded church - it’s a bit hard to tell” (F).

Another said:

“I think it’s always been a battle for any congregation to also be bothered about other congregations and I don’t think Methodists are much worse than they used to be, and in some senses I think our dependency on each other has grown....so its not a simple picture.” (K).

There was then a sense that whilst, perhaps, people within their local congregations were tending towards being more insular in their view of Methodist identity, there remained a sense of being connected within the Circuit and the Connexion in a way which was at times a pragmatic response to local needs, but also reflected a need to feel part of something bigger than the local congregation.

One of the Connexional leaders (J) interviewed referred to the annual prayer-card and prayer handbook which encouraged prayers for the President and Vice-President, and also gave prayers for each day for the different Districts within the Connexion. He said that these publications maintained a high take-up from local people. He viewed this as evidence for a sense of connectedness beyond the local church.

The trend towards larger Circuits was an additional feature within the interviews, although only two interviewees had had direct experience of working within, or with, such Circuits. There was a consensus of view that being a Superintendent Minister within a small Circuit was a role that was bound to be different in nature from being one within a large Circuit.

The Superintendent from a newly-formed and much enlarged Circuit (C) - though by no means one of the largest within the Connexion - reflected upon the changes in his role. He saw his responsibilities as being less generic in nature than they had previously been. Instead he, alongside two co-superintendents, was responsible for a portfolio of work. He spoke in positive terms about the developments which had taken place, and he valued the larger staff team of which he was now a part.

Others, however, saw the potential difficulties of over-large staff meetings, and how such meetings could be the places for mutual support, fellowship and discussion. One said: "a staff meeting becomes the size of a small circuit meeting and we know that's not how good business gets done" (G).

Relationships within staff-teams were not the only cause of concern, and, indeed, for some the area of relational working was key in their understanding of the nature of Methodism and its decision-making. One expressed concern with the development of larger circuits by saying:

"I think it changes..the nature of our identity and who we are...if we start with the premise that Methodism has been based on relationship...I find the situation quite difficult to imagine how, to take the extreme case, 80 churches can be in relationship with one another...." (E).

In addition to the above, issues over the relationships between large Circuits and Districts were raised, together with the shape of future Methodism where

autonomy had more-or-less been given to Circuits and Districts to decide upon the formation of larger Circuits for themselves, rather than as part of a national strategy. It was acknowledged that this had led, and would lead, to a markedly varied pattern of Circuit-size across the Connexion.

Two particular themes emerged during this first section within the interviews which are worthy of particular note. Firstly, relationships were seen as a central concept. Relationships within Circuits and within the wider Connexion were viewed as being important if the Church was to continue to view itself as a connected entity. One of the main reservations expressed with regard to the formation of the larger Circuits, was that relationships would be difficult to maintain across a large geographic or demographic area.

The second theme concerned structures of oversight, especially as they related to Circuits. It was universally recognised that the superintendency of a large Circuit required different skills and a different way of working than would be the case in a Circuit with a small staff team. In order to overcome some of the issues involved in this, the larger Circuits had introduced new structural tiers with the concept of co-superintendencies often designated on a portfolio-basis, so that each superintendent had responsibility for a particular area such as training or staffing. In addition, co-superintendents may have responsibility for the oversight of groups of churches, rather than all the churches within a Circuit. This by its nature is different from one superintendent having a reasonable knowledge of all the churches within the Circuit, and being able to relate, at least in part, to each of them.

In addition, the relationship between Circuits and Districts was also likely to experience change where some Circuits in the Connexion were becoming larger than some Districts. All of those involved in the interviews saw that this was an issue without immediate solution, and views varied on whether such

'messiness' mattered. One respondent commented, "I don't have a desire for Methodism to be neat...I would prefer Methodism to be effective" (K).

Before leaving this section, the final question relating to the effect of ecumenism upon Methodist structures at Circuit-level received little response as it was not a feature within the experiences of many of those interviewed, and so will receive no further comment here.

Leadership within the Connexion

The following questions were raised as part of the focus within this section:

- From where do you think Methodism should be receiving its spiritual and organisational leadership?
- There has been recent debate of the nature of the Presidency in Methodism - how would you see the continuing role of President of the Methodist Church in terms of its position and purpose?
- What would you see as the balance between the work of the President and that of Connexional Officers, especially the General Secretary?
- In Methodism it might be said that there is a suspicion of authority residing within individuals, and at the same time the Church, it might also be said, needs leadership from individuals - how would you see the balance within Methodism of episcopate residing communally - for example within the Conference, and the need for leadership from individuals?

Corporate Leadership

In response to the first of these questions, there were notable differences in the views presented about the nature and location of leadership within the Connexional church. Traditionally, and constitutionally, Methodism has embraced a corporate episcopate with an emphasis upon decision-making resting with groups of people such as the Methodist Conference at national level, or Church Councils at local level.

Some of the responses relating to the functioning of Conference indicated a level of concern over its current effectiveness. The following represent some of these comments from three different respondents:

“..the Conference only meets once a year and...has become something entirely different (*from how it used to be*)...it raises questions therefore as to whether it now exists in a way that can fulfill the expectations of it...” (D)

“I think Conference is dysfunctional..it’s not capable of making the detailed decisions that it tasks itself with” (K)

“..to my knowledge we’ve not consciously reneged on our commitment to Conference being our corporate source of leadership...but recognise that that can’t easily be exercised by a group of 300 people over ten days a year...” (F)

The interviews took place at a time which was shortly after the 2012 Methodist Conference where two decisions had been of particular concern to some of the interviewees. The first was a rejection by the Conference of part of the budget which would have resulted in a reduction in expenditure on an innovative mission-initiative. Some interviewees viewed this rejection as Conference failing to take the advice of its representatives who had spent a lengthy time formulating the budget, and that therefore Conference was involved in the fine management of details “of which it knows nothing” (K) - in the words of one interviewee.

The second decision was the acceptance by Conference of the recommendations of a paper on future training for ministers and others, which sought to streamline the locations available for training and to have two main institutions, which would therefore result in the closure of others. The report which led to this decision entitled “The Fruitful Field”¹⁵² was to be the subject of intense correspondence in the pages of the Methodist Recorder for over six months following Conference.

These two decisions typified, for some, the problems with Conference in that it either failed to rely upon the skills, expertise and time invested in proposals that were made - such as in the budget, or had presented to it far-reaching proposals which could be accepted without sufficient prior-consideration having been given.

¹⁵² The Ministries Committee of the Methodist Conference, *The Fruitful Field - a consultative document*.

Given the relevance of this correspondence to this chapter and to the wider issues within the dissertation, it is appropriate to make comment on some of the key points within that correspondence.

'Fruitful Field' and the Methodist Conference - correspondence within the Methodist Recorder

Between July and December 2012, a significant number of letters to the Methodist Recorder were concerned specifically with the Methodist Conference debate on the Fruitful Field proposals. Of the twenty-two editions of the Methodist Recorder that were audited, letters or articles on this subject were present in thirteen, with almost thirty letters having been published.

Before summarising that correspondence, it is important to note that writers to a newspaper or magazine are self-selecting, and therefore their comments cannot be taken as necessarily representative of a common view. Furthermore, the letters that are published by a newspaper do not necessarily reflect all the views submitted, as editors may have a particular agenda to pursue. Thirdly, the balance of letters within an edition is also an editorial decision, and so whilst 'Fruitful Field' appeared to be the most prominent issue on which letters were received, it is not known how many letters on other subjects were also received and left unpublished.

However, such was the volume of letters, and the significant status of some of those who contributed, including at least three past-Presidents of the Methodist Conference, that some reflection is important here. The views expressed almost unanimously reflected concern over the decision that Conference had made, with a number of themes emerging. These included concern over the loss of an academic training institution which was held with high regard; the apparent absence of ecumenical discussions; and the nature of the proposals for future-training.

However, it is those letters which explored in more depth the way in which Conference-decisions were reached, together with wider issues concerning Methodist leadership, which are relevant for the purposes of this dissertation, and which will therefore receive further comment.

In this respect, three themes were particularly evident in the correspondence. Firstly, there was concern over the consultation-process which was undertaken prior to the Conference debate. In some cases Conference will defer its decision-making until Circuits and Districts have been consulted on a particular issue¹⁵³, an option which was not taken in this case. One correspondent put it thus:

“District Synods, circuit meetings, church councils had no opportunity whatsoever to study and issue considered responses....should not the Methodist people have been trusted enough to allow them time to read, mark and inwardly digest and then to speak?”¹⁵⁴

Whilst the ‘Fruitful Field’ document was circulated to ministers, those involved in training, and Conference representatives before Conference met, it was the view of correspondents that this was still a hurried process on such a significant issue, with not all the details of the final report to Conference being adequately disseminated in advance.

Secondly, concern was expressed about the way in which the proposals were presented to, and dealt with by, the Conference itself. Criticism was focussed upon an over-emphasis on budgetary requirement, rather than the need for a high standard of theological education; inadequate time given for the reading

¹⁵³ A recent example of this concerned the proposals to extend the nature and term of office of the Presidency, where District Synods were asked to debate the issues, and return the results of a vote so that the Conference could be informed of wider views across the Connexion

¹⁵⁴ Letter from Revd John Rowland, published in the Methodist Recorder issue of December 14th 2012

and discussion of the proposals; and the absence of scrutiny by the Methodist Council of the direct proposals to close certain institutions prior to details being given at Conference. The former chair of the Strategy and Resources Committee in drawing attention to the last point in particular, wrote that:

“...while our decision-making processes are deeply important to us, almost iconic, they are in many contexts dysfunctional....is an impossible arena for handling matters of finance, personnel and organisation.”¹⁵⁵

Thirdly, and in relation to the correspondence rather than Conference, there was a concern that given the issues raised by Methodists within the ‘Letters Page’, nobody had responded ‘on behalf’ of the Connexion. This concern was expressed by a former President of Conference¹⁵⁶ who wrote -

“...will the Connexional team please review its regrettable policy of apparently never (and the alternative to “never” need not be “always”) responding to questions and concerns expressed in letters to the Methodist Recorder...”

It is an interesting question to pose as to who within Methodism is to speak in response to concerns raised over a decision made by a corporate decision-making body. Eventually, however, an article appeared in the Methodist Recorder in the last edition of 2012 written by a past chair and the present chair of the Ministries Committee¹⁵⁷. This Committee was given responsibility at the 2011 Conference to oversee the work which led to the ‘Fruitful Field’ proposals.

The robust response detailed the steps that had been taken in disseminating the proposals some six months in advance of the 2012 Conference, the

¹⁵⁵ Letter from Ken Wales, published in the Methodist Recorder issue of November 23rd 2012

¹⁵⁶ Letter from Revd Dr Neil Richardson, a past President of Conference and Chair of District, published in the Methodist Recorder issue of December 14th 2012

¹⁵⁷ Article written by Ken Jackson and Revd Leo Osborn, published in the Methodist Recorder December 21st and December 28th combined edition

consideration given to the 600 responses to the proposals, discussions held at the Methodist Council and, in the view of the article's authors, the significant time given at the Conference for discussion. The point was also made that a proposal to delay the decision-making for a further period of time to allow for discussion across the Connexion, was rejected by the Conference.

However the differing views presented within the pages of the Methodist Recorder might be interpreted, it is at the very least of concern that the body which, for many Methodists embodies episcopate in corporate form, came under such a degree of adverse criticism. Behind the criticism is a sense which was also present within the interviews carried out for this research, that Conference had lost some of its authority - if not in terms of the willingness of the Church to follow Conference decisions, then in the confidence with which those decisions were received.

Some of this concern was clearly linked within the correspondence with a feeling that Conference-business was presented in such a way that the representatives were too often being asked to 'rubber-stamp' proposals that were brought. In one letter a previous President of Conference, and therefore chair of Conference debates, noted:

"I cannot help noticing how Conference has increasingly become stage-managed and, having chaired Conference myself, realise that this cannot be easily avoided....I sincerely hope we can find a creative way forward to restore my own and other people's confidence in the Methodist Conference as a decision-making body."¹⁵⁸

Although the dissatisfaction expressed in the way Conference operated was also shared by a number of those interviewed for this research, those who had a

¹⁵⁸ Letter from Revd Tom Stuckey, a past President of Conference and Chair of District, published in the Methodist Recorder issue of November 23rd 2012

view tended to be those who were involved in attending Conference because of the roles that they occupied. In the case of the Superintendent Ministers who would not necessarily attend Conference, three out of four did not express a view regarding its effectiveness or otherwise. To some extent, Conference was seen as being remote from the issues affecting the local Church and Circuit, although it must be stressed that the interviews with Superintendents took place before the major correspondence within the Methodist Recorder concerning Conference decisions had really begun.

Although the most recent Conference will have been fresh within the minds of some interviewees, it was clear that their thoughts ranged beyond that event. Three interviewees, two Superintendents and one Chair of District, spoke about areas within the life and ministry of the Church which appeared to lack direction within the contemporary church. One interviewee said:

“I think some of the most significant changes currently affecting us do not appear...to be seen by, addressed by either Conference or Council¹⁵⁹ and therefore there is a real possible scenario, of leadership drift or leadership vacuum.” (F).

Part of the reason for this pessimistic view was the move away from what were termed ‘Divisions’ which covered different areas of the life of the Church such as Missions and Social Responsibility, a move referred to in Chapter 3. The three respondents who referred to the disappearance of these structures saw their demise as detrimental to the life of the Church because they had provided the means by which expertise could be gathered, and reports and recommendations provided for Conference. In addition, they enabled a sense of contact within the Connexion on important issues to be maintained. As one interviewee commented, “in the absence of that I think we’ve not really become clear as to where some of these things happen” (F).

¹⁵⁹ The Methodist Council meets between Conferences

Individual Leadership

Questions relating to leadership were asked without the term being defined, thus allowing interviewees the breadth to answer as they wished. It might be reflected that in some cases a Church is seeking leadership to move people forward, whilst in other situations leadership might be necessary to engender a sense of unity and to hold people together at a time of uncertainty. Both of these features of leadership were reflected within the replies, but perhaps more of a focus was upon the latter.

When individual leadership was discussed, then there was a natural focus upon those who held leadership roles at a Connexional-level within the Church, notably the President, the General Secretary / Secretary of Conference and also the Assistant Secretary of Conference who had become responsible for much of the business of the Conference.

Replies from those involved in leadership at District level, and some replies from those at Connexional level, indicated a degree of concern about the way in which leadership roles were developing. Whilst the combined role of the General Secretary of the Methodist Church and the Secretary of Conference as referred to in Chapter 3 continued to operate, in reality the Assistant Secretary of Conference had increasingly taken on the role of being the secretary of the Conference. In addition to these two office-holders, the historic role of the President of Conference was also explored within the questions and replies.

The potential confusion of this structure was mentioned by a number of interviewees. For example:

“the danger we have to avoid is them (*the three roles*) just trotting along in parallel with each other and not converging” (H),

and

“what we’ve got...in a presidential approach to being the General Secretary (*is*)...the potential to have two presidential voices and that could be a risk for the church..” (G).

Within this discussion, the perception of the wider Methodist Church about leadership also arose with a recognition that there was a low level of understanding of how the roles of leadership were defined and separated. This came across, for example, in the interviews with Superintendents who admitted their own lack of knowledge about connexional leadership, and indeed, in their lack of desire for such knowledge.

One interviewee (G) who wasn’t a Superintendent reflected that within the letters pages of the Methodist Recorder there was often a call for a longer-term Presidency so that a figurehead for the Methodist Church would be known¹⁶⁰. However, there was no recognition of the role of the General Secretary of the Methodist Church whose function was often to carry out those things which the ‘ordinary’ Methodist had ascribed to the President as being his or her responsibility. “I know we ain’t got it right at the moment” (G), the interviewee concluded.

When respondents were asked about the location of spiritual leadership, it was generally agreed that this came about through the gifts and charisma of individuals because of who they were, rather than as a result of the office that they held. As one interviewee put it:

“Spiritual leadership..has arisen from occasional charismatic leaders who people look to and recognise to have some kind of spiritual depth...I’d be

¹⁶⁰ For example in a letter dated July 13th 2012, a Methodist Local Preacher wrote, “We need to give our Presidents a longer term in office...in order to make their mark as being the voice of the Methodist church...our Presidents need time to become known in the country’s affairs. Otherwise who knows we are here?”

hard pushed to fill out a handful of names in my lifetime that would be of that particular quality.” (F)

Where individual names were mentioned they tended to be from a previous era of Methodism - such as Donald Soper, William Sangster, Donald English and Leslie Weatherhead, but there were a few exceptions to this. Those mentioned in the past or the present, could be divided into different categories when it came to the nature of the leadership which they offered.

There were, for example, those able to offer a depth of theological leadership which may not have been witnessed in their power of oratory, but who were respected for their quieter wisdom and academic rigour. Some individuals demonstrating these gifts had held Presidential office, and/or had served in senior positions within the Church over a number of years.

A further group might be those who could be considered as providing strong theological leadership in a more dynamic and prophetic way. A number of these figures may have served as President, but may have resisted taking office within the Connexional structures of the Church as such appointments could have been seen as having the potential to replace prophetic ministry with a more limiting role in Church governance.

Finally, were those who had a clear place and home within the Church, but were people with whom the Church at some level was less than comfortable. This discomfort may have arisen because of their uncompromising views, or because they represented a particular theological position. They may, nevertheless, have a distinctive role to play in encouraging others even if that leadership is without formal validation at Connexional-level.

It may, therefore, be that those who offer strong spiritual leadership may not necessarily be the people who would find it easy to become institutional leaders over a lengthy period of time. In some ways the one-year Presidency within Methodism has allowed for such leadership to be offered within a context which enables a theme to be explored by a President for a year, without the implication that the person holding the role will become part of the Church-establishment for a longer period of time. This will be given further consideration in the next section.

Finally, in contrast to some of the previous discussion, one interviewee identified spiritual leadership as being local rather than national in nature. He felt that the majority of Methodists would look to their local Church and its leaders for such guidance, rather than from a national figure.

The President of Conference¹⁶¹

When asked about the continuing role of the President of the Conference, interviewees used phrases such as “figurehead” (K), “a diplomatic role” (I), “a representative function of the Conference” (F), “the embodiment of the Conference in touring the Connexion” (J). Some identified particular roles that the President had, and other questioned whether some of those roles could be better handled by another person. One who had held Presidential Office (K), questioned whether he was best qualified to have been asked some of the questions directed on a day-to-day basis to the holder of that Office, when there were others in the Connexional Team who were more qualified to answer them.

It was, however, the representative role which was at the forefront of arguments in favour of continuing the tradition of having a President. There was also a sense of balance which a President could offer to those in executive leadership

¹⁶¹ ‘The Presidency’ as a term is increasingly refers to a shared role between the President of the Conference - an ordained presbyter, and the Vice-President - a lay-person. For the purposes of this document, it will refer specifically to the President as a role unless otherwise stated.

which some found to be a helpful concept, even though it might lead to ambiguous leadership. One interviewee expressed it thus:

“I’m not sure that I’d be happy with all authority sitting in one place...Wesley may have been wrong in his lifetime about that but he was right in his will!” (F).

Few saw the possible extension of the Presidency to a longer term to be a helpful concept, and many saw that it could lead to the further confusion of roles in Connexional leadership especially with that of the General Secretary. One interviewee stated:

“What we’ve got is a presidential approach to being the General Secretary, with an outward looking orientation...I think the potential to have two presidential voices is a risk to the Church...and therefore having a one year President makes it easier...” (G)

Another argument was that the one-year Presidency allowed for appointments which could be more adventurous for a Church which would be more careful with regard to a longer appointment. A longer-term appointment might, therefore, miss the opportunity to appoint those who challenge the Church, but with whom the Church might find it difficult to live on a longer-term basis. This view was summarised by one interviewee who in relation to the question of a longer-term Presidency said:

“I think we’d be a lot more careful about who we appointed as President which would...change the nature of the presidency because....at the moment you can occasionally get those people who stand for the role who perhaps have been a bit maverick...but we’re kind of saying to them ‘We affirm what you have offered to the wider church...and therefore we’re quite happy for you to be President for a year. We probably wouldn’t make you be leader...in the longer term.” (H)

A number of interviewees made similar points that a longer-term may restrict the type of minister being elected to the role of President. Similarly, it was noted that a longer-term might be welcome in the cases of some who took on the office, but not others, and that the period of service could not be altered according to who was elected!

Finally, the point was made by several interviewees that the Presidency was, in effect, a three-year post anyway because of the duties that were performed in the year before, and also in the year after, the Presidential year. Whilst correspondents to the Methodist Recorder sometimes wrote about needing a longer-term Presidency as a means of providing the Church with a publicly-known spokesperson, interviewees were doubtful, and in general saw this as an overstatement of the place and profile of contemporary Methodism, and the media or public's interest in it.

Episcopacy

Finally, interviewees were asked for their views regarding the introduction of episcopacy within British Methodism:

- There have been many debates during the past 30 years over the introduction of bishops into Methodism - would you see a place for episcopacy within British Methodism, and if so where?

Only one interviewee immediately and strongly concurred with the view that the Church should have bishops. Some others in their responses did not raise objections to the idea, although many were at pains to point out that Anglican episcopal model was not the only model, even though it appeared to be the one that Methodist people focussed upon whenever the issue was raised.

Some, from their own ecclesiological perspectives were not in favour either because such a move had the potential to increase the power of ordained ministers - “we need to honour laity more” (K), was an expression used, or because it underlined individual rather than corporate authority. For example one respondent said, “my own feeling is that Conference is a bishop and Conference is a body of people and I much prefer that to an individual” (B).

For one interviewee, the only argument in favour of an episcopacy that he could consider as being a ‘swaying argument’ was within an ecumenical context. He said, “if in order that there be major advanced ecumenical (*developments*)...episcopal office had to be embraced, that’s the only argument I can envisage.” (F)

From the varied responses to this part of the questions from those engaged in leadership in the three different contexts of ministry, no clear view was forthcoming in favour of the introduction of the episcopacy into contemporary Methodism.

In Chapter 4 it will be recalled that different locations for episcopacy were proposed in the paper “What sort of bishops?: Models of episcopacy and British Methodism”¹⁶² and put to the Methodist people. In their responses to the question of the location of episcopacy were it to be introduced, responses were varied and this matched the variety found in the congregational questionnaires.

An example of this lack of consensus was found in two contrasting views held on whether Chairs of District should be bishops. One interviewee stated, “I think I would make all...chairs bishops straight away” (D), whilst another when asked about the location of episcopacy said, “I don’t think it’s the district chairs.” (J)! Neither of these strong responses came from the interviews with District Chairs.

From other responses, there was a view that superintendent ministry was the natural and biblical location, one interviewee said:

“if you’re talking seriously about early biblical and early church models of oversight then there is a question there about the superintendents...that may mean fewer but larger circuits.” (J).

Those who saw the most appropriate location in terms of an understanding of episcopacy as being at the level of Circuit Superintendents, also concurred with the last quote that the number of Circuits, and therefore the number of potential bishops, made this location largely untenable.

For a few respondents, the multi-ethnic nature of Methodism especially in London was a factor. They recognised that a large number of Methodists had their origins within African Methodism where the episcopacy was part of their church-structures, and its introduction would not present the same issues for them as for other Methodists who did not share this background.

¹⁶² The Methodist Church, *What sort of bishops?: Models of episcopacy and British Methodism*.

Some saw Connexional figures, especially the President, as being the most natural episcopal location because of the pastoral and travelling nature of that role. Some linked this with the introduction of episcopacy in early American Methodism as reported in Chapter 2, where bishops travelled around their dioceses in a similar way to the travels of the President of Conference during the year of Office. This naturally led to further discussion about the length of term of the presidency and the concept of a Bishop remaining one for life, even after the presidential office had been completed.

Finally, one interviewee (J) raised the possibility of members of the Connexional Team - the General Secretary and Assistant Secretary - being viewed as having a kind of episcopal oversight. This view did not come from any of the interviewees engaged in Circuit or District leadership.

In other words, all of the suggestions contained within the paper, “What kind of Bishop”, and referred to in Chapter 4, were still prevalent within the responses received, and a lack of consensus about location was present within the interviews. At the heart of some of the replies was an unease about the whole notion of an episcopacy which might be rightly or wrongly perceived as being an hierarchical model. This was in opposition to their concept of what the Church should be about, and some of these concerns are summarised in the following section.

Conclusions

It will be evident from the above account that there was a lack of unanimity on a number of the issues raised with those being interviewed, but nevertheless some useful conclusions may be drawn, with some key themes emerging.

A relational and connected Church

The structures within Methodism have traditionally been relational in nature rather than strictly hierarchical. Therefore the Church Council for local churches elects representatives to the Circuit Meeting, where representatives are elected to the District Synod, which in turn elects representatives to the Methodist Conference. In an ideal situation, each tier should be supportive of the other so that, for example, the Circuit supports the local churches through offering resources which those churches could not otherwise provide, and the churches support the Circuit in its life and ministry.

Conference is, following this model, a gathering of representatives and as part of its annual meeting, 'Memorials'¹⁶³ from Circuit and Districts over particular issues are presented either to Conference itself, or as part of discussions held by relevant bodies prior to Conference. Conference makes decisions which then have an effect upon the whole of the Connexion.

Two areas within this study were the cause of concern and discussion with reference to the relational nature of connexional Methodism. Firstly, the introduction of very large Circuits with many churches and a large staff, were seen as having the potential to make relationships between different churches at Circuit-level more difficult. This potential loss of connectedness with other

¹⁶³ "Memorials to Conference' provide the means by which local Methodism can bring a matter of concern to the Methodist Conference. Sometimes these may be debated within Conference, but they are often dealt with by a relevant committee prior to Conference with a recommendation being made to Conference for a decision one way or another.

local churches could be seen as damaging to the wider sense of Methodist Churches being inter-connected.

Secondly, the strong criticisms of perceived developments within the way the annual Methodist Conference functioned were apparent during the interviews. These were based on the sense that Conference was either engaging in issues that would be better-managed elsewhere - such as budgets, or that it was being inadequately prepared to discuss items of significant importance - such as the debate over training. Additionally, there was concern that the Conference was increasingly reliant for its agenda on a small group of Connexional Team members, rather than from the wider Methodist people, and that in the way it was structured it was becoming less representative and more managed.

Whilst acknowledging that it was not easy to have a Conference which dealt with a heavy agenda in a short space of time to make decisions without a high level of organisation, the concerns reiterated the need for the Conference to be representative of the Methodist people's concerns, and which would encourage their mission. Developments over previous decades, such as the dismantling of structures for discussion, dissemination and mission, had not helped.

As the Conference continued to be seen by many of the interviewees as the location for authority and leadership and episcopacy within the Church, then the view that it was not meeting the needs of a connected church were serious.

Corporate Leadership and the Episcopacy in Methodism

The final point within the previous section is important within an appreciation of how Methodism has seen leadership since the time of Wesley's death. John Wesley sought to ensure that he would not be followed by someone who took upon themselves the nature and extent of authority that was his during his

lifetime. There was a sense from the interviewees that this factor within Methodist leadership continued to be important.

Chapters 3 and 4 contained some reflections upon the nature of leadership within Methodism, and how different positions had led to schisms within the movement. Therefore it was of interest, though not perhaps surprise, to see that the different views of those being interviewed reflected, at least to some extent, these historical perspectives.

For some, therefore, the notion of a strong and directive national leadership for the Methodist Church was not a concept with which they were at ease, especially if such a leadership was enshrined within individuals. There was a greater ease for them if such leadership resided within a Conference in which authority was derived from the Methodist people, rather than deriving from a Connexional team or executive.

For others, leadership resting within ordained ministry was itself problematic. In some answers there was, for example, an emphasis upon the Presidency as a two-person entity consisting of the President as an ordained presbyter, and the Vice-President as a lay person. Some of those interviewed would have been happy for the President of Conference to be a lay person as was the case within Primitive Methodism.

For all, the effective working of the Methodist Conference as the vehicle through which the Connexion conferred was of significant importance. This was in evidence both in positive and negative statements. For some, when asked where leadership lay, gave the clear response that it was with the Conference. For others, the demise in the way in which Conference was perceived to function mattered because within the Methodism of their

understanding, it was with Conference that good leadership and governance *should* be seen.

Furthermore, the lack of any real widespread desire - with the exception of the comments from one respondent - either in the interviews or in the questionnaires, for an episcopacy served to underline the sense that such a move was not within 'the heart' of British Methodism. At one level it may be concluded that this was due to the sense that different orders of ministry, lay and ordained, formed one ministry within the Church, and that the introduction of another 'tier' would not fit with this image.

Some were able to express this strongly from an ecclesiological perspective in which church history and traditions reached back to pre-Wesley and pre-18th Century non-conformism. Their Methodist identity was within this tradition, and there was a sense of discomfort with the notion that any one person was to hold significant and long-term authority which reduced the influence of corporate episkope.

The perceptions which were forthcoming about the Presidency served to underline this point. Value was attached to the concept of the President of Conference being a representative figure within Connexional Methodism. The visit of a President therefore brought with it the sense that the Connexion was visiting. Whilst being an historical appointment, and probably one which would not have come into being if a Church was "starting from here", the fact that it was a stage removed from the Connexional Team was seen both as important and potentially 'messy'. In a number of interviews, however, 'messiness' was not necessarily seen as being a negative quality.

There was, for some, a resistance to both leadership and authority having a centralised location at all. Whilst, therefore, the Connexion and being

connected, were seen as features of Methodism to be valued, the heart of Methodism was located within local churches and Circuits where relationships could be nurtured. It was in this respect, that concerns over very large Circuits were expressed, and the need for good Connexional structures to nurture local mission and ministry.

In conclusion, within the eleven interviews, diverse views were expressed concerning the present and future leadership within the Church. It may be the case that these views are held together because of the very nature of the messiness of Church structures. Therefore:

- a one-year Presidency does not take upon itself powers which some would see as too great
- those engaged in Connexional leadership have a balance in the working of Conference which can challenge their recommendations.
- the local church continues to be of primary importance for mission and ministry, but derives support from elsewhere as well as itself.

However, some of these messy structures were also the subject of serious concern within the interviews, and some of this wider concern will be explored in the next and final chapter.

Chapter 7 - Whither episcopate in contemporary British Methodism?

This final chapter will seek to draw together the historical and empirical research conducted as part of this thesis, and address some of the arguments that have been made in previous sections. In particular, consideration will be given to the potential re-shaping of episcopate within contemporary British Methodism.

History and context

It is the twin areas of history and context which, it is to be argued here, are of greatest significance not only in the shape of episcopate within contemporary Methodism, but also as obstacles to significant re-shaping that might be proposed.

History - The early chapters of this study outlined the history of Methodism in Britain, together with a comparison with the early stages of the development of an episcopal Methodist Church in America following independence. It was argued that the key difference at this time was the political separation of America from Britain and, consequently, the separation of the Methodist movement in America from an allegiance to the Church of England. Not only did this remove any residual sense of loyalty to the Church of England, but also provided the freedom for John Wesley to do something new, which included the appointment of leaders for the American Methodists who went on to adopt episcopal titles.

The situation in Britain was very different with significant parts of Methodism - typified by Charles Wesley - continuing in their loyalty towards the Church of England. After the deaths of the Wesleys, and into the nineteenth century divisions in Methodism, different factions argued for varying degrees of

localised autonomy. These differing views had an effect upon the shape of the emerging Church, including the nature of its episcopate.

Those who sought the establishment of a separate Church did not seek to mimic the Anglican structures which were being left behind, and in general it would be reasonable to conclude that a simpler and less hierarchical form of ecclesiology was sought.

Furthermore, the experience of having a strong leader with an episcopal nature, albeit not title, was not something that the movement after the death of John Wesley appeared to wish to mirror. Authority was therefore vested in the hands of the Methodist Conference, rather than in a John Wesley-like successor. This has been emphasised through the succeeding centuries in the limited-term appointment of Presidents of Conference who “sit in Mr Wesley’s Chair”.

This is not to say, however, that Methodist leaders of considerable charisma and authority have not been present within the history of the movement in its different strands, but in essence, it might be concluded that the heart of British Methodism was not, and is still not, an episcopal heart.

In addition to this early history of the development of Methodist leadership, the post-Wesley divisions and the reasons for them, together with the shape of the Methodist Church which emerged after 1932, also need to be borne in mind. The different strands of Methodism with their particular emphases remain relevant when it comes to ecclesiological discussion. As Beck put it:

“Issues of lay participation in leadership and lay presidency at Holy Communion continue to be raised from time to time by people who may not be able to name the tradition they represent but have nevertheless inherited its emphasis.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ Beck “Methodism: Shifting Balances 1939-2010” 67

Such emphases were evident in the interviews carried out for this research.

The history and varying traditions within the Methodist psyche run deep and are compounded by the context of contemporary Methodism.

Context - Historical nuances are still at play within the Methodist Church today. Whilst Conference has voted for a move towards episcopacy residing in individuals, the congregational research amongst Methodist lay people which has been outlined here, failed to lend support to such a move. The interviews with Methodists presbyters in positions of leadership, also failed to arrive at a consensus of support either for the concept of episcopacy, or over the question of where it might be located were it to become a reality.

It may be concluded that contemporary Methodism continues to be suspicious towards the investment of significant authority in the hands of individuals, with a continuing support for structures such as Conference and the Presidency which, at least to some extent, link the church together. The issue for the Church is whether it is content to continue with a situation of 'messiness' and ill-defined episcopacy at Connexional-level, or whether the point has come to radically revise its structures in favour of greater clarity of leadership and episcopacy at the different levels of church life.

It could be argued in this respect, that 'messiness' is all right if it is understood. Therefore, from the viewpoint of leaders within Methodism who understand the systems of leadership and why they have arisen, it might be acceptable for those structures to lack a degree of definition and to have overlapping names and responsibilities. However, for those viewing the organisation from outside, or being within the organisation without that knowledge, unnecessary messiness may simply add to confusion and a lack of a sense of involvement within a poorly-understood institution.

The context, however, is wider than simply referring to the views of Methodists alone. The Church has over recent years been in conversation with ecumenical colleagues, notably the United Reformed Church¹⁶⁵ and the Church of England.

The URC¹⁶⁶ provides the largest number of partner churches with Methodist congregations in local ecumenical partnerships. It is with the Church of England that the Covenant of 2003 was agreed which paved the way for further consideration to be given to increased ways of working together¹⁶⁷. The sense in which the Methodist Church is involved in looking 'both ways', i.e. towards non-episcopal congregationally-based non-conformism, and also towards the episcopal Church of England, cannot but add to the sense of a lack of clarity in Methodism's own structural debates.

These two ecumenical partners reflect the broadness within Methodism itself which is a further key contextual element. The interview section of the research - especially in relation to the use of the introduction of bishops - was marked by differing views. In part these differences were about the churchmanship of the interviewee with some being in favour of, or at least comfortable with, the notion of episcopacy, whilst others responded to the proposal with a distinct lack of comfort.

Methodism is, as it always has been, a broad church with those whose ecclesiology is firmly within a non-conformist, 'priesthood of all believers', low-church model on the one hand, being balanced by others who would happily join in a re-united church with Anglican colleagues and all that such a move might involve, on the other.

¹⁶⁵ Most recently, representatives from both churches to explore the challenges to be overcome to enable greater unity at a meeting in October 2012

¹⁶⁶ United Reformed Church

¹⁶⁷ 'An Anglican-Methodist Covenant' signed between the two churches on November 1st 2003

Given this history and context, together with the considerable debates that have taken place in recent years and summarised in Chapter 4, a move to an historic episcopacy looks to be unlikely wherever it were to be structurally situated, although this chapter will argue that a part-introduction might be beneficial to the Church's leadership.

Proposals for Change - a view from the literature

Taking history and context into consideration, recent commentators have sought to outline models for British Methodism which seek to address the perceived need for a greater sense of personal episcopate, and in some cases advocate the introduction of episcopacy. This section focuses upon some of those models.

Norman Wallwork, a Methodist Minister who is a supporter of greater Methodist-Anglican unity, presented a paper in 2011 at the symposium "The Challenge of Leadership in a Changing Church" at York St John University¹⁶⁸, in which he outlined how Methodist structures - especially central structures might be developed. In his paper, Wallwork briefly summarises some of the historical reasons for the present structures within Methodism, including the absence of bishops in the British church. He makes the same point that was made during the interview section of this study, i.e.:

"In a very real sense the Conference is, as it were, the bishop for the Methodist Church. Because the Conference is the 'bishop' and the Connexion is 'the bishop's' community, the connexion can be seen as having certain key characteristics of a diocese within the Christian Church – albeit an exceptionally large one!"¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Wallwork, *Leadership and Oversight in the Methodist Church*.

¹⁶⁹ Wallwork, *Leadership and Oversight in the Methodist Church*. 4-5.

His paper then proceeds to consider recent reports within Methodism, and to focus upon how a Methodist episcopate might look were one to be introduced. In particular he refers to the Joint Implementation Commission's report of 2008 into the working out of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant¹⁷⁰, and the place within it for the introduction of an episcopal President of Conference as a "Bishop for the whole Connexion". Outgoing President-Bishops would continue to hold episcopal title, and therefore over a period of time the number of Bishops within British Methodism would grow to form what Wallwork refers to as an 'episcopal team'.

Wallwork offers a picture of how a Methodist episcopate would look - for example it would be accountable to Conference, and collegial in working with the present and past President-Bishops of Conference. He also cited ways in which the introduction might encourage the Church of England in areas such as the introduction of women bishops, and greater episcopal collegiality.

Whilst Wallwork acknowledges the changing situation with regard to the size and therefore the functional operation of Circuits, he does not make proposals in this paper for the introduction of episcopacy for anyone other than Presidents of Conference.

David Chapman, another Methodist minister with a keen ecumenical interest, also looked at this issue from an ecumenical perspective in his article referred to briefly in Chapter 4¹⁷¹. The thrust of his argument in relation to episcopate, is that contemporary British Methodism needs to look anew at the advantages of investing authority in named and known individuals. He considers that Methodism has fallen short in its appreciation of how the gifts of leadership are

¹⁷⁰ report available at the website <http://www.anglican-methodist.org.uk/>

¹⁷¹ Chapman, "Methodism and the Future of Ecumenism"

to be found in personal episcopate, because of its desire to continue with episcopate which was exercised communally.

Whilst Chapman does not go into detail in his chapter about how an episcopal Methodist Church would function, or where episcopacy would be situated, his argument that Methodists need to consider the theological relationship between personal, collegial and communal episcopate is important, and relevant to this study. In particular, he would encourage the church to move on from its prevailing view that the gifts of the Holy Spirit in leading the Church are more likely to be found in a corporate episcopate than in a realisation that “the Holy Spirit bestows gifts upon individuals for the building up of the body (1 Corinthians 12).”¹⁷²

Andrew Hindmarsh, writing from an interest in organisational research, reflects upon successful structures of decision-making, leadership and implementation for business, and compares them with structures within the Church. He notes, “the right structures can support the work of the church, the wrong ones serve only as shackles.”¹⁷³. He goes on to note that churches need also to have clear goals, and could usefully learn from the business-world where leadership rather than management, is increasingly seen as important.

In the context of this study into Methodism, the importance of the history of Church leadership may be viewed as a rich inheritance or, in Hindmarsh’s terminology, a shackle. The differentiating feature might be taken to be whether or not the inherited structures assist or hinder the Church in its relational life and mission.

¹⁷² Chapman, “Methodism and the Future of Ecumenism”, 461.

¹⁷³ Hindmarsh “Supports or Shackles?: Methodist Structures in the 21st Century”, 74.

It is clearly important for an organisation to have an understanding of key roles within that organisation, and it is suggested that the questionnaire-results failed to demonstrate an awareness of the importance of Conference or key-people for the future direction of the mission of the local church. In addition, the duplication of the term 'Secretary' within the Connexional Team, referred to later in this chapter, is almost bound to cause confusion within the organisation, and the need for clarity over how decisions are made - especially in the light of the Fruitful Field debate - is essential.

Hindmarsh proposes a number of changes to local and Connexional leadership. In relation to the office of President of Conference, he proposes that there should be a longer-serving President of the Methodist Church, and appears to support a proposal from ex-Vice President Sir Michael Checkland for the Secretary of Conference / General Secretary of the Methodist Church to become Secretary-General of the Methodist Church to offer a "much more effective Connexional leadership"¹⁷⁴

Hindmarsh also makes brief comment in relation to local leadership structures, including giving Superintendent Ministers formal responsibility for staff management, something which he argues is currently offered by the Circuit Meeting - i.e. through corporate rather than personal authority. He writes, "In some ways, it is the Circuit Superintendents with their power over almost every detail of Circuit activity, who are in a constitutional position to be the modern Wesleys. Whether they are or not, of course is up to them."¹⁷⁵

It might be argued that Hindmarsh fails to present a sufficiently full picture of how leadership and/or oversight are actually exercised within the Methodist Church. For example, the above quote does not really reflect how it is in reality

¹⁷⁴ Hindmarsh "Supports or Shackles?: Methodist Structures in the 21st Century", 84.

¹⁷⁵ Hindmarsh "Supports or Shackles?: Methodist Structures in the 21st Century", 85.

for Superintendent ministers who may in fact see ‘power’ as not something that they possess, or would desire to possess, within a collegial structure where staff are encouraged to watch over, and be watched over, by their colleagues in love¹⁷⁶. The Ministerial Focussed Study produced prior to this dissertation goes into some detail in considering this matter, and questioning what sort of Superintendents the Church actually wants or needs¹⁷⁷.

Finally, a view from outside Methodism by Malcolm Grundy¹⁷⁸ which summarised the situations regarding episcopate and episcopacy within a selection of non-Anglican churches, begins with the statement:

“Although not an episcopally structured church...the Methodist Church has chairmen of Districts who have some of the same responsibilities of oversight.”¹⁷⁹

Leaving on one side the use of the term ‘Chairmen’ which was replaced some years ago with the non-gender specific ‘Chair of District’, it is of interest that it is this tier of Methodism which receives attention, whilst none is given to Connexional leaders, and whilst superintendents are referred to as those given oversight of local circuits in line with John Wesley’s initial intentions, little further comment is made.

Grundy recognises the considerable efforts within Methodism to provide a careful analysis of how a Methodist model might work, and how it may differ

¹⁷⁶ The Methodist Church, *The Nature of Oversight Leadership, Management and Governance in the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, 35.

¹⁷⁷ Maunder, *How oversight is understood and exercised by Methodist Circuit Superintendent Ministers within the South East District of the Methodist Church*.

¹⁷⁸ Canon Malcolm Grundy is currently engaged in doctoral studies at York St John University. He is a retired Anglican clergyman who has served in a range of roles within the Church of England including being Director of the Foundation for Church Leadership. He has written books on Church leadership and growth amongst other subjects.

¹⁷⁹ Grundy, *Leadership and Oversight*, 85.

from an Anglican model. In his comments on Methodist-Anglican conversations, he notes that continuing dialogue,

“...has had the great advantage of bringing a focus to thinking on many key theological and ecclesiological subject. In particular the work of clarification about the work and role of bishops has helped both churches to deepen and articulate their understanding”¹⁸⁰

In this, he affirms the importance of the historical context and tradition in which different denominations operate, and notes that the British Methodist context is very different from Methodist situations elsewhere in the world where episcopacy has become the norm.

Grundy is less than exact in his description of Methodist leadership and perhaps overplays the role of District Chairs - perhaps likening Districts to Dioceses and therefore Chairs to Bishops. He does, however, note that it is at Circuit and Connexional level where much of leadership and oversight is exercised. There is, however, a clear recognition that episcopate is multi-faceted to include aspects of oversight and supervision. In his section on the Methodist Church, for example, he helpfully concludes: “Episkope is more than being a bishop, and oversight is more than superintending the church and its clergy”¹⁸¹.

Learning from other traditions

Whilst this study is concerned with leadership in Methodism, it is of interest to consider structures within some other churches to see whether a different form of episcopate might be beneficial.

¹⁸⁰ Grundy, *Leadership and Oversight*, 167

¹⁸¹ Grundy, *Leadership and Oversight*, 86.

In the non-episcopal Church of Scotland for example, the Moderator exercises a similar role to that of the President of Conference in that the post is for one year, and is described as 'honorary'¹⁸². Like Methodism it has an annual meeting - the General Assembly - which gathers to confer on the year that has passed, and decide on matters affecting the church which then have the effect of being binding upon the Church.

As with British Methodism, bishops are not a part of the Church of Scotland, although the reasons for non-episcopacy date back rather further into the seventeenth century. Again, similarly to Methodism, although episcopacy is understood to reside within corporate and collegial structures as well as with individuals, some consideration has been given to the introduction of a personalised episcopacy, including as part of discussions with the Episcopal Church of Scotland and other churches regarding church unity in Scotland¹⁸³. In this certain similarities with debates in Methodism will be detected.

The other denomination worthy of consideration here is the United Reformed Church with whom, as noted earlier, close Methodist links have been formed both locally and nationally. This is interesting in that the congregational ethos and structures of the URC are quite different from Methodism. There is a strong emphasis on congregations having autonomy, and whilst a Methodist Conference-like General Assembly meets regularly, with a yearly nominal leader in the form of a Moderator being appointed, it is localised church decision-making which is seen to be of primary importance.

This key difference is emphasised, to take one example, when ministers are appointed. Within Methodism a presbyter entering the ministry is ordained at the Methodist Conference and stationed by the Conference within the

¹⁸² http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about_us/how_we_are_organised/whos_who

¹⁸³ See for example: Methodist Church Reports *The Scottish Church Initiative for Union*

Connexion. In the URC a newly trained minister has to be invited by a local congregation and is ordained locally once that invitation takes place. Further stationing within Methodism occurs through the Conference, rather than by the local congregation.

The URC, in common with other denominations, continues to consider the role played by those in leadership both within current structures and also within the context of ecumenical relationships. For example, a discussion paper published in 2011¹⁸⁴ encourages the Church's Faith and Order Reference Group to consider questions of episcopacy (amongst other things) in the light of Methodist-Anglican discussions on bishops, and the possibility of the introduction of ecumenical bishops in Wales^{185 186}.

In the cases of both the Church of Scotland and the United Reformed Church, history, the Church's own context, and, significantly, the ecumenical context, play important roles in the denomination's thinking about episcopate. Given these factors, the model followed by one denomination cannot easily be transposed onto another, and the churches continue to function as a reflection of how that Church was formed in the first place, and the context of its current view of ecclesiology together with ecumenical influences which may affect that view.

A Methodist model from elsewhere

When British Methodism is considered alongside other Methodist Churches around the world, as noted in Chapter 2's exploration of the origins of

¹⁸⁴ United Reformed Church Mission Committee, *Discussion paper of the Review of Ecumenical Relations*.

¹⁸⁵ United Reformed Church Mission Committee, *Discussion paper of the Review of Ecumenical Relations*, 4.

¹⁸⁶ The proposal for ecumenical bishops in Wales has also led to other papers such as that by the Deputy Secretary of the United Reformed Church Richard Mortimer 'Episcopate and Unity' 21-29

American Methodism, then it is unusual in its maintenance of a non-episcopal structure. As with comparisons with other British denominations, history and context are relevant to this situation as can be seen through one comparison.

The most recent newly independent Methodist Church is the Methodist Church of the Gambia. Until recently, Gambian Methodism was an overseas District within the British Methodist Church. Methodism in Gambia is one of the oldest in Africa, going back to 1821, but it is a small denomination with only around 2000 members. In 2003 the Synod of the Gambia District received a paper outlining the steps that would need to be taken to enable a move to autonomy to occur, and this was approved at the British Methodist Conference of 2007.

Up until autonomy had been approved, the most senior Methodist church leader in the Gambia was a Chair of District appointed by the Methodist Conference, in the same way as other District Chairs in Britain are appointed. Following autonomy, the initial short-lived title adopted was President of Conference, but this was quickly changed from President to Bishop following a period of consultation with Gambian Methodist Circuits.

This case is cited because history and context are both at work in the nature of episcopacy which was arrived at. Gambian Methodism has its roots within British Methodism¹⁸⁷, but the decision regarding the title to be given to the leading presbyter appears to have been reached quite easily due to at least two factors. Firstly, the use of bishop as a title within African Methodism is not unusual and would not, therefore, have been out of place in the Gambia. Secondly, as the Gambia's Head of State is a President, it was deemed to have

¹⁸⁷ some African Methodist Churches are more closely aligned to the American United Methodist Church - such as the Ivory Coast, whereas for others the link with British Methodism is closer. Not all have adopted episcopacy by name, Sierra Leone, for example, continues to have a President of Conference rather than Bishop

been a little strange for the new Methodist Church to adopt the same title as the nation's leader.¹⁸⁸

Prior to the decision being made to adopt an episcopal title, discussion papers were produced by the first President of the Gambian Conference, Revd Norman Grigg, his designated successor, Revd Peter Stephens, and the Secretary of the Conference, Revd Bannie Manga. Each paper outlined the history of episcopate and episcopacy within Methodism in its different contexts, and each agreed that there would be benefits for the Gambian Church in the adoption of Bishop or Presiding Bishop as a title for the leading figure within the new Church.

In his paper, Manga explores the history of the episcopate, and highlights the intention for a bishop to be the shepherd of the flock. He notes that the title of bishop as referring to one person who had leadership within a local Church emerging during the growth of the early Church, rather than as a Gospel imperative. Nevertheless, he saw value in the adoption of the title within Gambian Methodism because of the positive nature which might be attached to an episcopal role. In this he refers to the servant/shepherd role of Christ, and concludes that the use of the designation 'bishop' "...parallels the model that Christ offers to the world more closely than the designation President."¹⁸⁹

In relation to the issue of conflicting titles between head of Church and Head of State, Manga noted, "The term Bishop is understood globally to refer to a context of some ecclesial order while the term President is associated more with political leadership. Since the Methodist Church is more

¹⁸⁸ For the purpose of this section, the views of Revd Norman Grigg were sought who was the last Chair of the Gambia District, and the first presiding Bishop of the Gambia Methodist Church

¹⁸⁹ Manga, *Title of the Head of the Methodist Church: a Reflection*, 9.

ecclesiastical than political, it is suggested that the designation of the chief servant of our Church has its foundation in ecclesiastical circles.”¹⁹⁰

Peter Stephens noted in his paper¹⁹¹ that when Methodist Churches united with other denominations - as in the Church of South India, or where further unity was being considered - as in Britain as part of the process of looking forward to unity with the Church of England, then the title of Bishop has often been adopted or proposed. He argued that such a move would be appropriate for the Gambia in its new situation.

Whilst the primary purpose of the papers referred to above was to put the case for a move to an episcopal title for the head of the Gambian Methodist Church, there were other aspects of episcopate and general ministry which received attention. There was a sense that from the outset, terms referring to ministerial office should be clear. It was therefore felt that the title of bishop would have greater clarity for those within and outside the Church, than President. The nature of the episcopacy that was being proposed was placed firmly within the debates within British Methodism in stressing the pastoral role of the bishop, and seeking to avoid a sense of monarchical episcopacy. The continuing role of the Conference as a body of corporate episcopacy was also emphasised.

These points served to reinforce the proposition that the introduction of episcopacy was to do with the introduction of a *Methodist* episcopacy with a focus upon the place of the bishop as leader and servant. Episcopacy was to be seen in the personal oversight offered by the holder of that office, whilst corporate episcopate continued through the Conference which would elect, and itself oversee, the Office of the Bishop-President. Collegial episcopate would

¹⁹⁰ Manga, *Title of the Head of the Methodist Church: a Reflection*, 9.

¹⁹¹ Stephens, *The Methodist Church The Gambia – The Title of the President*.

continue through the presbyters who worked with lay people within the Church.

Within Gambian Methodism, therefore, although historically the church was closely linked to non-episcopal British Methodism, a different history, i.e. that of African Methodism was also at play. In addition, the context of operating within a President-led country in a continent where other Methodist churches already had bishops, contributed to the decision to move to episcopalianism when autonomy was achieved.

Whither episcopate in British Methodism

Having briefly considered models from elsewhere, together with examples from the literature where change is proposed to the means by which episcopate is exercised, consideration will now be given to the location of episcopate within the different tiers of British Methodism. This will be followed by suggestions made in the light of the research for this project regarding how the Methodist Church might seek to further develop its oversight and leadership.

Episcopate at Circuit level

Beyond the level of the local church, episcopate is most clearly seen within the Circuit, and personal episcopate found in the Superintendent Minister who not only has responsibility for his/her own churches, but oversees the work of lay and ordained colleagues and works with others in developing the vision, ministry and mission of the Circuit.

The role of the Superintendent has been summarised within the document, “What is a Circuit Superintendent?”¹⁹² which outlined the historical nature of superintendency before considering the role of the Superintendent in relation to the Circuit. Areas in which responsibility was shared with other ministers within the Circuit - i.e. oversight in mission and worship through the exercising of their ministries of word, sacrament and pastoral care - were explored, before the particular responsibilities of the superintendent were stated.

The report explored the areas of presiding, overseeing, coordinating and superintending, and identified responsibilities for providing models of good practice for colleagues and the Circuit, assisting the Circuit in an understanding of the role of presbyters, helping colleagues to discern priorities in their ministry, and in their own continuing ministerial formation.

¹⁹² The Methodist Church, *What is a Circuit Superintendent?*

‘What is a Superintendent’ formed part of the background literature review for the Ministerial Focussed Study produced as part of the DThMin course in 2010, and which is referred to later in this chapter¹⁹³. As part of the research for that study, interviews were held with Superintendents who had differing perceptions about how their role was viewed within different Circuits. Some found the role of oversight especially difficult in situations where there was not a mutual acceptance of that role, and the absence of real authority in situations which required leadership was also mentioned.

It will be recalled that one of the proposals at the time of the paper on the nature of the episcopacy which could be introduced into British Methodism¹⁹⁴, was the option of increasing the size of Circuits with the appointment of Superintendents as Bishops with oversight within these larger areas.

This proposal reflected a view that episcopacy within Methodism would reside most naturally with Superintendents whose role included the pastoral oversight of colleagues and churches, and the development of vision and leadership for Circuits. However, it was also recognised that it would be impractical and ecumenically insensitive to appoint a large number of superintendent presbyters as bishops. Interestingly, these conclusions were similar to those contained within the Faith and Order Committee report from 1981, and referred to in Chapter 3¹⁹⁵.

Since the publication of the paper, the number of circuits has been reduced as part of an ongoing process of circuit-merger. In part, the aim of this process has been to better-equip the church for mission by rationalising resources. However, the process has had other consequences. For example, Circuit-size

¹⁹³ Maunder. *How oversight is understood and exercised by Methodist Circuit Superintendent Ministers within the South East District of the Methodist Church*.

¹⁹⁴ The Methodist Church, *What sort of bishop? Models of episcopacy and British Methodism*.

¹⁹⁵ Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order Volume One 1933-1983

across the Connexion is now extremely varied, with the role of Superintendents within these varied Circuits having changed as a consequence. These changes were widely commented-upon during the interview stage, although not always in a negative way. It is, however, open to debate how sustainable it is for the Methodist Church to continue to use the same words for structures and forms of ministry which are becoming increasingly differentiated.

Whilst the interviewees did not condemn messiness, there was concern over the variable picture of circuits across the Connexion, and one option would be to look closely at circuit-size with the aim of enabling greater consistency. The intentional re-forming of Circuits in an ordered way according to a Connexional plan, could have the potential benefit of allowing for the possibility of providing greater co-terminality between circuits and Anglican diocese and URC areas. The structure within each large Circuit could consist of a lead-Superintendent who would be seen as the local focus for episcopate, and if the Church ever deemed it acceptable, episcopacy, and who could therefore be termed 'Bishop'.

Together with the lead-Superintendent, other aspects of the work of the Superintendent could be met by co-Superintendents responsible for particular geographic areas together with areas of responsibility such as training, finance, property, and so on.

Episcopate at District level

A development such as that outlined above, would be likely to lessen the need for a District-level tier, as Circuits would move towards being similar in size to present Districts. It would be important, however, not to lose some of what is to be valued about Methodist Districts. It may be recalled that one interviewee proposed that District Chairs should be the location for immediate episcopal

designation, and in part this was because of their pastoral knowledge of a wide area of churches and people, and their role in evangelism.

District Chairs are not responsible for the pastoral care of individual church congregations¹⁹⁶ and part of the thinking behind this was for them to be able to take a lead role in mission and evangelism within their Districts. They are also naturally seen as having an oversight role within the District, being the focus for ecumenical discussions, and being pastorally supportive to lay and ordained Methodists.

However, were Circuits to be regrouped and enlarged, then they could meet together regionally for mutual support and conferring with designated Superintendents taking on some of the responsibilities currently held by District Chairs.

Episcopal at Connexional level - people

At Connexional-level, interviewees during the research raised concerns over the potential duplication of role by the General Secretary of the Methodist Church and the President of the Conference. Into this relationship has more recently been introduced the wider role of the Assistant Secretary of Conference who has increasingly taken on primary responsibility for the way in which Conference operates, and most recently in 2012 (and post-dating the interviews held for this study), the appointment of a Connexional Secretary.

The roles of these three posts are defined in terms of their function within the Connexion and in relation to Conference. The General Secretary of the Methodist Church/Secretary of the Conference's role is referred to on page 68 in terms of having oversight and leadership within the Church, and a

¹⁹⁶ This is true with minor exceptions such as the small Channel Islands District where the Chair does have pastoral oversight for a small number of churches as well as being Superintendent Minister within one of the islands

responsibility for strategic management and vision. He/she also has a role in encouraging good governance within Connexional bodies and at more local District, Circuit, and local church level.

The Connexional Secretary is charged with putting vision, strategy and policy into effect, exercising management oversight of the Connexional Team, and to represent “the Church throughout the Connexion and beyond.”

The Assistant Secretary of Conference, who also has the role of Head of Governance Support acts on behalf of the Secretary of Conference at the Conference itself and the Methodist Council. He/she is also responsible for issues of governance such as the dissemination of the work of governance bodies within the Connexion, overseeing the relationships between the Conference and ministers, and in this respect having a role in terms of the resignation and reinstatement of ministers. The Assistant Secretary is also responsible for managing the nomination of District Chairs.

Given that there are three key roles each with the word ‘Secretary’ in their titles, it is not a little surprising that for Methodists and others who are not particularly involved at Connexional leadership level, some confusion would be present. Of these three roles, one - the newly-introduced Connexional Secretary - is currently exercised by a lay-person, and in the context of this study, it is of interest that it is this role which is identified as having the task of representing the Church “throughout the Connexion and beyond” which in other churches would surely be viewed as a mark of episcopate. Such a descriptor cannot but raise questions about the role of the General Secretary and President in relation to being a representative figure within the Church.

Other roles as described above, have an episcopal flavour to them. For example, United Methodist Church bishops have responsibilities with respect to

the functioning and stationing of ministers, and some of the description of the role of the Assistant Secretary of Conference, has a cross-over with this episcopal role in the United States.

It would seem opportune for Methodism to re-visit the way in which episcopate is exercised at Connexional level, partly because of the potential areas of confusion identified in the interviews, but also so that the Methodist Church at a wider level has an understanding of the structures that are in place. The outcome of the questionnaires in terms of congregational members being unable to name the President of Conference or the highly-influential General Secretary of the Church may not be particularly surprising, but within a Church which prides itself on its sense of connectedness, is of concern.

It might be proposed, for example, that the overall secretarial duties for Conference reside with one named person so that the Assistant Secretary of Conference would become the Secretary of Conference, thus separating the two roles currently held by the one person who acts as the Secretary of Conference and General Secretary of the Methodist Church. This would enable the General Secretary to relinquish the part of the job title relating to Conference, and to more fully deal with the day-to-day business of the Connexion and Connexional team, and the shaping of the direction of the Church.

The President of the Conference is the most historic role at Connexional level, and from the interviews there was a residual respect and appreciation for the pastoral, travelling role embodied by this position. At one level this respect may be because the holder of this post is seen as being separate from the Connexional Team, and therefore from the bureaucracy of Methodism. It would be proposed that this role be underlined so that the President is clearly seen as the representative of the Conference and the Church “throughout the Connexion and beyond”¹⁹⁷, and is able to offer pastoral episcopate.

¹⁹⁷ see the description of the role of the Connexional Secretary on page 160

The historical concern that this might lead to too much power being held Wesley-like within one person, would now seem to be a little redundant. It was the manner of Wesley's management and authority which the church did not wish to reproduce, but perhaps the Church in the contemporary world now needs a clear pastoral leader.

Such a move would necessitate a closer working between the President and the Connexional team on the themes to be pursued by the President during the term of office. The occupant of this role has currently been largely able to follow a theme which was dear to them, but not necessarily at the forefront of Connexional thinking.

One of the interviewees raised the interesting notion of the General Secretary being the voice within the Church and the President being the voice from the Church. Both of these posts have components of episcopate, and if the Church were to enter an episcopal world, then both posts might be seen as appropriate locations for episcopacy.

Episcopate at Connexional level - the Conference as bishop

This research was conducted at an interesting time in the life of the Church. A significant decision taken regarding future training had the result of serious questions being asked about the way in which Conference operated, and these in turn could be taken to question the notion of the Conference being the location for corporate episcopate. What came across from the interviews and the letters to the Methodist Recorder was not that authority should necessarily reside elsewhere, but that if Conference were to continue its historical role, then its functioning needed to be improved.

However, it may be the case, and is argued here to be the case, that the debate over Fruitful Field highlighted the situation of the Church having the worst of

both worlds. On the one hand, the reticence of the Church to place authority - episcopal or otherwise, clearly within the hands of individuals, has resulted in a lack of clarity with regard to who is to speak on the Church's behalf when a critical situation emerges within the Church itself. This was brought home very clearly in the appeal by Neil Richardson¹⁹⁸ for there to be some response from someone at Connexional level to the concerns that were being expressed.

On the other hand, if episcopal authority is seen to be exercised corporately by Conference, then it is clear that Conference needs to operate effectively and representatively if it is to retain the confidence of the Methodist people. In his second article on Connexionalism from 1991, Brian Beck writes of the Conference as being a servant of the connexion, rather than the other way round, with the consequent responsibility when significant decisions are made for them,

“to be tested against a wider constituency, and for its decisions to be disseminated and assimilated (and thus owned or disowned) by the church as a whole.”¹⁹⁹

In general it must be said, the Church accepts its connexionality with considerable responsibility so that matters which are likely to be contentious are not infrequently passed to Districts and Circuits for discussion. Such discussion has been argued for in relation to Fruitful Field, and the response to the Conference decision may be indicative of a deeper malaise relating to effective conferring and deciding, something which Beck sees as important within the quote above.

¹⁹⁸ Letter from Revd Dr Neil Richardson, a past President of Conference and Chair of District, published in the Methodist Recorder issue of December 14th 2012

¹⁹⁹ Beck, “Some Reflections on Connexionalism (2)”, 49

In the previous chapter the question was raised regarding who was in a position to make a response when Conference, as the location for corporate episcopacy, reached a decision that was then questioned. At the time that Fruitful Field correspondence within the Methodist Recorder was at its zenith, the regular quarterly pastoral letter from the General Secretary of the Methodist Church and, it will be recalled, the Secretary of the Conference, was sent, as usual, to all ministers. No comment was made within the letter about the concerns being expressed, instead the letter was accompanied by a leaflet outlining how training in the future could be arranged more beneficially following the acceptance of the Report.

This lack of comment may simply be viewed as an unfortunate omission, but might also be interpreted as the General Secretary not having the view that it was his place to comment on a Conference decision. However, even if this was the case, there were clearly pastoral issues involved which were worthy of comment from those involved in pastoral care and leadership for the church and its ministers.

A complaint often arising from Methodist people is that with the annual change in President, there is an absence of a consistent voice to speak within the public arena on behalf of the Church. The concerns expressed during the Fruitful Field correspondence, appeared to indicate that there was also an absence of such a voice to speak to the church from within itself. This is an important omission at a time of pastoral upset.

The concept of 'Conference as bishop' was raised during the interviews, especially by those who did not wish to see a move to personal episcopacy, as well as in the literature review towards the beginning of this chapter within the thinking of Wallwork, for example. If this role is to continue with positive regard being offered to it, then the interviews suggested that certain changes

were necessary. Conference is certainly vulnerable if it is seen as neither representative of the views of the Methodist people in the decisions that are made, nor able to provide a pastoral and episcopal voice into situations of internal distress.

It would be seen as desirable for the Conference to continue to be an historical and important structure within Methodism, and to retain some of its current authority and decision-making powers. This would serve as a counter-balance to the possibility of too much authority residing within individuals. The change in the term of office of the President would remove one necessity for the Conference to meet annually to elect the holder, and thus it would be proposed that a larger Conference meet less frequently, and for a longer period of time.

Into this picture would be increased authority for the Methodist Council, which now meets between Conferences to manage a considerable amount of business. The Council could be empowered to have greater decision-making authority, and such a move is likely to improve the way in which business is managed.

Finally, there is a sense in which the Connexion needs to re-connect with the Methodist people. In the interviews there was a feeling that something had been lost in the way in which Methodists were encouraged to share in a direction for their giving and mission due to the changes in the way in which different areas of ministry were organised.

In part such reorganisation has accompanied a realisation that the Church is a smaller entity than once it was, and that some aspects of its organisation needed to be reduced for financial and staffing reasons. However, by developing a larger Conference which met less frequently, increasing the role of the Methodist Council, and affirming the place of larger Circuits within regions, the wider church may be enabled to have a sense of unity in its mission, and the

opportunity to hear from, and report to the whole church, on areas such as social responsibility, mission and education.

Proposals for Change - a view from the research

The research, both in its empirical form and through the views of other writers including those cited above, leads to the conclusion that episcopacy within the Methodist Church in Britain is exercised in different ways within the different tiers of the Church.

Change at Circuit level - At Circuit-level, episcopacy is exercised in a personal form through the role of the Superintendent, collegially through the staff team and forums such as meetings of the Circuit's lay preachers, and corporately through the Circuit Meeting.

At one level it might be concluded that this system has merit to it. The Superintendent is seen to be the lead minister within a Circuit, and Superintendents are likely to value the sharing of leadership with lay and ordained colleagues through the different structures that are present.

The interviews conducted for this study failed to gain any sense that either the superintendents who were questioned, or any of the other interviewees, saw a need for a change to an episcopal title for Superintendents. The questionnaire results indicated that if bishops were to be introduced, then it was at the level of Superintendent where that introduction might best be made, but the total results were somewhat skewed by those for the London Circuit, and support in any case was hardly convincing.

However, given the changes within Circuits it is possible to perceive that a change in this situation might become desirable. If, as proposed earlier, there was a greater sense of Connexional lead in the rationalisation of Circuit size, so that they were ordered along similar lines to the larger Circuits now being formed, then the role of Superintendent would change, and would become a natural and less ecumenically-sensitive location for episcopacy. In addition,

such a move would signal a clarity in the role of the Superintendent as the location of episcopacy at local level.

The Ministerial Focussed Study referred to earlier drew a contrast between the literature from the Methodist Church as it related to the role of Superintendents as “pastoral supervisors”, and the reality of particular situations where there was an absence of good collegial relationships, or a shared understanding of Connexionalism. In such situations the Superintendents who were interviewed as part of that study found their oversight role not only difficult, but at times impossible. The re-defining of the Superintendent’s role as episcopal may serve to emphasise the nature of that role within a localised situation.

The Study also noted the views of Superintendents who saw themselves as Connexional representatives within local situations. In other words they took their stationing by the Conference to a Circuit seriously, and saw that such an appointment was made on the part of the Connexion through the Conference. The location of episcopacy at Circuit level in the person of the Superintendent would serve to reinforce the ‘connectedness’ of the Church and the principle that Superintendents superintend on behalf of the Conference.

Although the above proposals may be seen as desirable at one level, the reality is that given the current ecclesiological climate within the Church; the absence of a centralised system to enable homogeneity of Circuit-size to take place, and a culture of self-determination within Districts and Circuits, the proposals would be extremely unlikely to succeed. Furthermore, it is argued here that it would be desirable for the Methodist Church to continue to re-assert the importance of Connexionalism, and episcopacy at Circuit level may only serve to take away from this concept.

What is important, however, is that the nature of superintendency be asserted more clearly within the Church. The Superintendent has a key role in offering personal episcopacy, and also in leading the collegial episcopacy which is present within staff meetings and other gatherings such as the meeting of local preachers. In this, together with lay and ordained colleagues, he or she leads the whole people of God in their ministry, but does so as the one appointed by Conference to take that lead.

Change at Connexional level - the adoption of a personal episcopacy at the level of the President of the Methodist Conference is seen as having merit.

Hindmarsh's suggestion that the re-naming of the role as President of the Methodist Church would be a move towards a greater clarity of the role, and it is here where episcopal terminology could be appropriate.

Within a Connexional-Church this would serve to emphasise the sense of being connected beyond local church and circuit, and would thus avoid the suspicion that 'diocesan-type' structures were being created which might occur were Superintendents or District Chairs to become bishops. At this stage in the life of the Methodist Church, a reinforcing of the concepts associated with connexionalism would be welcome and may go some way to countering concerns arising from the questionnaires and interviews over a greater sense of congregationalism emerging within Methodism in Britain.

Russell Richey, in a 2013²⁰⁰ publication, praises British Methodism's understanding of connexionalism as an ecclesiological and theological concept, in comparison to what he sees as a less-worked through position within the United Methodist Church of the US. In particular he notes the interdependence between the local and wider church, and the way in which

²⁰⁰ Richey "Episcopacy and Connexionalism: Ecclesiology and Church Government in Methodism"

each element within the structure of British Methodism is dependent upon another part of the whole.

The obvious value with which these structures are held by an observer from abroad, does perhaps carry with it the sense that here is something to be enhanced rather than diminished. It is argued that the appointment of a Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church would act as a catalyst to such enhancement.

Philip Drake, a British Methodist minister, writing in “Unmasking Methodist Theology”, provided a useful summary of some of the tensions and benefits connexionalism which have been evident within this study. He refers to the creative tension which the model brings in that “it rules out both arbitrary authority from above and a self-centred congregationalism from below”²⁰¹. He also highlights threats to the system including a sense of separation between Circuits and connexional decision-making.

Both Richey, from an American viewpoint, and Drake see much of value within a connected Church, and the proposals made here would seek to reinforce this historical and contextual aspect of Methodist practice. Similarly, Beck in outlining the case for connectedness argues for Christianity being a relational faith, and thus for an individual church being

*“essentially linked to the wider church. Circuit, district, connexion are circles of belonging which may take...different forms...but the essential thing is the belonging.”*²⁰²

The Gambian model is arguably closer to the British context than episcopacy in the United States which has developed over the 250 years which have passed

²⁰¹ Drake. ‘Methodist Membership’, 135.

²⁰² Beck, ‘Some Reflections on Connexionalism (2)’, 45. (Beck’s emphasis for “essentially”.)

since its origins in Coke and Asbury. As was argued in Chapter 2, even at that time the contexts were different, and have become more so over the intervening centuries as indicated by Beck²⁰³, amongst others.

The model from the Gambia, which much of the argument above serves to take on for British Methodism, also introduced a longer term of office than the one year British President of Conference model. The term adopted was six years, with a maximum of two terms for any individual²⁰⁴. It may be the case that as the Gambia was moving from a Chair of District model with initial appointments for five year, then a longer term was easier to adopt than moving from a one-year Presidency model as would be the case in Britain.

Again, the model from the Gambia has something to commend it here. The move towards a longer-term appointment would assist Methodist congregations in their knowledge of the post's occupant, and sense that the appointed person had a place within their church. Additionally, in terms of ecumenical working, there would be greater clarity regarding who was seen as the lead figure within Methodism. Therefore, it would be proposed that the post should be for at least three years as Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church, with occupants of the post retaining the title Bishop after their term of office had come to a conclusion. There are a number of perceived advantages to this which are summarised below.

Firstly, there would a greater level of clarity regarding leadership at Connexional level. By the adoption of the personalised episcopacy in the office of President, there would be a clear indication of where pastoral oversight was exercised on behalf of the Conference and Connexion.

²⁰³ Beck, "Some Reflections on Connexionalism (1)" 52

²⁰⁴ Information from Revd Norman Grigg through personal correspondence

Secondly, there would be an identifiable focus for Methodism's voice not only within the denomination, but beyond. The Presiding Bishop would be seen as a representative of the Church who, with lay and ordained colleagues, would attend and speak on behalf of the Church community.

Thirdly, in ecumenical relationships the office of Presiding Bishop would provide for a clarity in discussions with the Church of England, and could also model a form of episcopacy - based on collaborative ministry, and deriving authority from corporate episcopate - which could be helpful in widening a view of how episcopacy could be exercised.

Finally, by extending the term of office of the President, the occupant would have the opportunity to become better-known around the Connexion, and the pastoral-visiting nature of the role would be more comprehensively exercised and less-rushed than under the current arrangement.

As noted earlier, such a move would have the consequence of opening-up the debate over the frequency with which Conference would need to meet, and the issues on which it would need to decide. In part this would be because Presiding-Bishops would not need to be elected annually at Conference. More importantly, perhaps, by enhancing the role of the Methodist Council and its remit for making decisions, the Conference itself might be freed to offer an episcopally-important role in enabling greater connectivity within the Church, and the sense that it was indeed offering episcopal leadership.

Conclusion

This study has sought to outline the historical origins of Methodism to explore why the Church has the forms of leadership which are present today, and to consider whether or not those forms need to be reshaped. The conclusion from the rich history of Methodism in this country, when coupled with the contextual ecclesiology of a broad church, serves to reinforce the view that episcopate is exercised in individual, corporate and collegial ways at different levels of Church structure.

There was a persistent concern within the interviews over a potential diminution in the relational nature of Methodism, a feature which was evident from the very beginning through the connected structures that Wesley introduced. This concern was firstly related to increased Circuit-size, and the possible reduction in the sense in which congregations could effectively be linked with each other within considerably enlarged Circuits.

The increases in Circuit-size clearly need to be accompanied by ongoing personal, corporate and collegial episcopate which is able to offer oversight and leadership within that larger context. The interview with the Superintendent from a newly-formed larger Circuit indicated some of the ways in which Circuits are examining their structures to enable this to happen.

Secondly, considerable concern was expressed about the relationship between the Connexion in its leadership, the Conference, and the wider Church. In part this was a reflection on the Fruitful Field debate, but was also raised outside that context.

There is strength in, and respect for, corporate episcopate as found within the Methodist Conference. However, there was also the clear sense expressed that all was not working as effectively as it should. At Connexional-level it was

evident that there was a marked need for an improvement in the relational nature of Church structures. The alternative would be a continuing sense of drift between a Connexional-team, and the Connexion itself. Such a drift was typified within the research by the lack of knowledge by local Methodists of those in positions of leadership, and the real concerns expressed during the interview stage.

In this, the re-affirmation of the role of Conference as the meeting place of Methodism and its offering of episcopate, together with a greater clarity regarding the exercise of personal Connexional episcopate through pastoral leadership and vision, would, it is considered, be of marked benefit. Whilst the development of an historic episcopate looks unlikely given the views expressed within the questionnaires and the interviews, and the failure of previous proposals to elicit widespread support even within the limited office of the President, such a move could, nevertheless, be a positive one for the Church in the present and in the future.

Proposals have been offered with the aim of reducing the 'messiness' of church structures, improving the structures of leadership, and enabling the church to offer a clearer voice when needed. To this end, the adoption of the role of Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church would be a move which, when linked with other developments, may add clarity to the ecclesiology of contemporary Methodism in Britain, and affirm the valued nature of connexionalism.

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Appendix 1 - Congregational Questionnaire

Questionnaire - Congregation Members of Methodist Churches

Section 1 - about your Church - please circle the most appropriate answer for each question

1.1 Where is your Church situated?

In a rural village

In a town

In a city

1.2 How many people usually worship in your Church during the main Sunday service?

0-20 people

21-40 people

41-60 people

61-80 people

80+ people

1.3 Apart from your church, how many other churches does your minister look after?

1

2

3

4

5+

don't know

Section 2 -about those in leadership positions within the Methodist Church.

2.1 Do you know the names of the following people within the Church? Please circle the most appropriate answer, (you do not have to give the person's name).

the Minister of your Church

Yes I definitely know the name

I think I know the name, but would need to check

No I definitely don't know the name

the Circuit Superintendent Minister

Yes I definitely know the name

I think I know the name, but would need to check

No I definitely don't know the name

the Chair of District

Yes I definitely know the name

I think I know the name, but would need to check

No I definitely don't know the name

the current President of Conference

Yes I definitely know the name

I think I know the name, but would need to check

No I definitely don't know the name

the General Secretary of the Methodist Church

Yes I definitely know the name

I think I know the name, but would need to check

No I definitely don't know the name

2.2 How influential do you think the following people are upon the life of your local church? Please circle the most appropriate number on the scale below where 1 represents 'very influential' and 5 'not influential at all'.

the minister of your church

very influential				not at all influential
1	2	3	4	5

the superintendent minister of your Circuit

very influential				not at all influential
1	2	3	4	5

the Chair of your District

very influential				not at all influential
1	2	3	4	5

the President of Conference

very influential				not at all influential
1	2	3	4	5

the General Secretary of the Methodist Church

very influential				not at all influential
1	2	3	4	5

Section 3 - about meetings within the life of the Methodist Church

3.1 How influential do you think the following meetings are upon the life of your local church?

Please circle the most appropriate number on the scale below where 1 represents 'very influential' and 5 'not at all influential'.

very influential	<u>the Church Council for your church</u>				not at all influential
1	2	3	4	5	
very influential	<u>the Circuit Meeting</u>				not at all influential
1	2	3	4	5	
very influential	<u>the District Synod</u>				not at all influential
1	2	3	4	5	
very influential	<u>the Methodist Conference</u>				not at all influential
1	2	3	4	5	

3.2 Have you ever attended a Circuit Meeting? Yes No

3.3 Have you ever attended District Synod? Yes No

3.4 Have you ever attended the Methodist Conference? Yes No

Section 4 - about bishops - please circle the most appropriate answer for each question

4.1 Over the years the Methodist Church has discussed the possibility of having bishops. Do you think that it would be a good idea if there were bishops in the Methodist Church in Britain?

Yes No Don't know

4.2 If the Methodist Church did have bishops, who do you think should be a bishop? - please circle one or more of the following options

Superintendent minister Chair of district President of Conference
General Secretary of the Methodist Church I don't have a view

Section 5 - about yourself-please circle the appropriate answer for each question

5.1 In which age-range are you?

18-25 26-35 36-45 46-55 56-65 66-75 76+

5.2 What is your gender? male female

5.3 If you have held any offices within your local church, please list one or two of them below:

A small number of those who have completed questionnaires will be invited to take part in a further stage of this project which will involve a short interview.

Would you be willing to participate in this next stage if invited? Yes No
If you are willing to be invited, please fill in your details below:

Name Telephone number.....

Address.....

**All questionnaire responses will be treated as confidential, and kept securely.
Thank you for your help, it is greatly appreciated.**

Appendix 2 - Letter to interviewees

e-mail:

Address.....

Tel:.....

Date

Dear ,

Research relating to leadership within the Methodist Church

Thank you for your willingness to be interviewed as part of the research project which I am undertaking. I look forward to meeting with you at _____ on _____ at _____. As part of King's College's ethical approval requirements for research, I have enclosed an Information Sheet with some details for you to read through if you have time, and a Consent Form which I can collect from you when we meet. Should you have any queries relating to these, please do not hesitate to contact me.

As there needs to be consistency between the different interviews, they will be semi-structured and thus use a particular set of questions, but discussion beyond those questions will also be desirable as our conversation progresses. It would be helpful if we could focus particularly on issues affecting local Circuits from your perspective. The interview should not take longer than 45 minutes, and will - with your agreement - be audio-recorded. For your interest, I have listed some of the main areas to be covered when we meet:-

The life of the local church and Circuit

- the extent to which local churches in Methodism might be becoming more congregational in outlook. What might be the implications of this?
- The understanding at local church level of the nature of being a connexional church.
- The effects on Circuit and District leadership of increasingly varied Circuit-size.

Connexional Leadership

- The continuing role of the President of Conference.
- The balance between the work of the President and that of Connexional Officers.
- The possible place of episcopacy and the introduction of bishops within British Methodism.

Thank you again for your help which is greatly appreciated, I look forward to seeing you next month.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Maunder

Appendix 3 - Example of Interview Transcript

Interviewer: So if we could talk firstly about local churches and circuits and one of the thrusts of the historical side of the research is where at our origins we became circuit orientated and connexionally orientated, rather than congregational churches. And so part of the questioning is about whether our churches now, in your experience, see themselves as becoming or being more congregational than connexional in their outlook?

Respondent: I think having just been a superintendent is quite helpful because that's still very fresh experience. My perception is that certainly in the (*omitted*) context there is a lot of clear Methodist identity, people don't necessarily see themselves as a Methodist as opposed to any other kind of Christian, they've found a church that either works for them because of their cultural background or geographically or because they like the style of worship and in a sense the ecclesiology behind that is irrelevant ... it's things like the invitation and matching of ministry and I've certainly perceived in some congregations, particularly sharp in LEPs or where there's a URC history but not only now; it's also in what I'd call mainstream Methodist congregations, that there's a definite expectation that, for instance, if a minister is matched in the stationing, that the whole congregation would turn out and expect to have a say and actually when you explain that there's an Invitations Committee and that a few individuals will be consulted and meet the poor person that's come to have a look [laughs], not the whole church, and that there's no sense of coming to preach and be tested on or interviewed and so on.

For some people that's where it really erupts because there they're ... either a high sense of local democracy, in which case why isn't it a local church? ... or there's a mistrust perhaps about decisions that have been made before and the kind of ministers they've ended up with, or 'Can we have one like so and so, who was wonderful?' and so there's an expectation that they'll have a more active role within that, rather than a sense of being chosen and elected through due process, the people who will make this decision on our behalf and so I think that's where some of the tension in a church that is moving towards a more congregational understanding of itself would be and that certainly played out locally.

I think, also, about decision making around what I'd call the 'trust' issues, to do with buildings and finance, you know, ranging from churches that have a very clear sense of their Methodist identity and that actually paying an assessment is a good thing and is actually value for money, to those who would ... [laughs] ... you know, if you outline what they're going to get for that money, they're not

paying for their minister, to those who very much think it's directly related to the assessment place for the minister and we should have a say over who that is.

But I think there's a real tension in terms of things like whether a church should close or a property should have money spent on it or not money spent on it, that in terms of offering ministry, the decision making leaders that are at circuit level, but the trusteeship sits at the local church and so actually if we mean that the circuit is the unit for mission and ministry, for ecumenical engagement, whatever, but the reality is you can't make a good use of resources because actually the people with the resources and the decision making are in the local church and how is the circuit supposed to influence that, how can they have a strategic view? And, again, that's a source of tension and that's where the rub is.

Interviewer: Which takes us to Tom Stuckey's arguments, as President.

Respondent: Right [laughs].

Interviewer: To create a circuit control, really, I suppose?

Respondent: Well, I think there's a strong argument for it, I do. I think a lot of good missions or potential good missions are actually stymied by a sort of 'over my dead body' sense or a sense of failure or a sense of, you know, 'Well, it's alright for them up the road but we're going to keep doing it the way we've always done it. This is here to see us out.'

Interviewer: Just thinking about circuit structures – clearly there are radically different circuits now; from a one-minister circuit, through to 30 minister circuits. I wonder if you've got reflections on how things might pan out and also about the role of superintendents within that radically different scenario?

Respondent: Absolutely. I think there's probably somewhere someone who could do research on what the optimum size of circuit could be. I mean, certainly single minister circuits are a nonsense and, you know, it's time we got rid of them and while Conference have said, 'Please try', actually at the moment there's no power to do that; it's got to be done by local negotiation, which is at one level fine but actually if you end up with a particularly powerful circuit steward or superintendent or someone who's digging their heels in, perfectly good conversations have hit the rocks because of that. So I think there's some issues there. I think these sort of super-size circuits, with huge numbers, I don't think is ever so helpful actually and I certainly think, in terms of gender, a number of the districts who've gone down the line and got into much bigger circuits have gone from perhaps a third of their

superintendents being female, to a much smaller proportion. Now, whether that's about women aren't particularly attracted to being in leadership there or whether it's about those who said, 'Oh, it's okay, I'm happy to not carry on being the super' and waiting for someone to say, 'No, no you must' but nobody ever did [laughs] is a more female tendency. But I think there are some questions around gender there.

Interviewer: Have you had any insight from women former superintendents who are no longer superintendents?

Respondent: No. I mean, I'm aware from stationing conversations of women who are reluctant to go into those bigger circuits because I guess it doesn't tick the right pastoral boxes for them and certainly some male ministers as well who would just say, 'Why would I want to do that? It's all about administration. Where is the connectedness with the local identity of people, with the local context?' - if you get too big then you can't do that.

It's interesting seeing how districts have a particular identity ... I mean, there's a question I haven't got an answer about ... for districts made up of say six or eight super sized circuits, where the local identity is understood – because you can have a regional identity, you can have a good ecumenical regional identity that a district can serve well but whether the district or a super circuit can actually cope with the differentiation of needs on the ground, the subtleties and nuances, you know ... if we take Lancashire, which is a big district and was where I was before I came to London, East Lancashire and the Fylde are very, very different - yeah, there is sort of Lancastrian identity, which it makes sense for a district to hold but if you take East Lancashire ... would see themselves and their context as quite different from Blackburn folk, which is eight miles down the road.

So it's what is a helpful structure for the church that meets the needs and subtleties and nuances of a local context for mission but is also able to be flexible and strategic across a wider thing? I think there's something quite powerful in the idea of circuits that reflect borough boundaries because then, certainly for superintendents, you're dealing with one borough superintendent for the Police, you're dealing with one Mayor, you're dealing with one council and I think there's an argument perhaps for something like that. But that works well in London, whether it would work well in the Manchester and Metropolitan area or wherever, I don't know. I don't know. I think the problem with looking for a *single* solution is that there isn't one. I'm absolutely certain we shouldn't have tiny circuits because there's no collegiality and accountability and it's just lonely for people but I resist the really, really big marches, a circuit with 80-odd churches in it.

- Interviewer: Do you think because circuits and to some extent districts have done their own thing, it feels like there's a lack of cohesion about plans at circuit level really?
- Respondent: Yeah. I mean, I think it's interesting because I think, on the whole, I'd argue for a certain amount of subsidiarity and that districts need to be able to make decisions that suit their context. So if they've got a range of hill half way across a circuit, well that's not going to work, or a motorway cut through. So they're going to need to respond to their local needs and I'm not one for the big, ideal, perfect solution because that's always disastrous as well and the most marginalised voices don't get heard. So I wouldn't look for one big plan but maybe it's the Methodist in me but I have a sense that moderation is quite useful and that there is a manageable staff team - for instance, if you get more than 10 or 12 presbyters/deacons in a staff meeting and then you add in lay leadership, actually those are becoming big committees rather than meetings that are going to form policy, responding to the prompting of the spirit or the context; a staff meeting becomes the size of a small circuit meeting and we know that's not how good business gets done, you know, you need space for conversation – but anything smaller than, I think, four staff is too small and I think that's just not going to work.
- Interviewer: Thank you. Just rounding that bit off ... there are certainly some circuits now that are bigger than some districts ...
- Respondent: Yes. [laughs]
- Interviewer: ... I guess the knock-on question then is; what happens with districts if that pattern continues and whether there's a place for a district?
- Respondent: I think if the same thing was happening everywhere I think there'd be a much stronger argument for looking seriously at the existence of districts but I do think, certainly ... and this isn't about keeping the job! ... that having experienced the ... [hesitates] ... I suppose if you look at it in terms of some of the things that district chairs do, what is there between a circuit context and a connectional context? There needs to be *something*, a place, a group, an individual, that can help mop-up some of the issues, whether it's to do with discipline, complaints, how we do stationing – how are we going to station if we've got a load of super circuits in the connection but nothing to hold it together? And there is an increase in regionalisation in some areas, so there's four or five North West districts work together as a regional group and that's really effective and I can see how that would work. I can also see how it could become a sort of mini protectionism, where you lose the connectional perspective because you're looking to each other's borders rather than the bigger picture -

and I think one of the advantages at the moment of the chairs meetings and possibly as part of CLF as well (Connectional Leadership Forum) is that sense of a shared perspective and a knowledge in the room of actually every circuit in Methodism and I'm not sure, if you don't have *something* operating at that level, I'm not entirely convinced yet that I've seen another way of working. I don't know. I hope it's not just an emotional response. [laughs]

Interviewer: Let's think about the wider Methodist church and a little bit more about whether historical structure comes in as well – and, again, thinking connexionally and where we as a church should be getting our spiritual leadership from (or from whence should we get spiritual and organisational leadership), if anywhere?

Respondent: I think that's interesting. My church background, I was baptized in a continuing primitive Methodist church that hadn't joined a good Methodist union, so in my DNA is a very low church, non clerical, non hierarchical is how the church should be and I think there's a huge advantage in holding on to that as part of our Methodist identity. I'm really glad you've joined 'spiritual and organisational leadership' in the same sentence because sometimes there's a way of speaking; we offer a paradigm where they're separated and we talk about management on one hand and spiritual on the other and at a cost I think because I think if our strategic and organisational development, journey, growth is not absolutely informed by and moulded by our spiritual pilgrimage, then ... you know.

So we do need people in the leadership structures of the church who are clearly recognised, whether they are ordained – I would say that, with my background – but I do think there's an argument why a significant number of them do need to be ordained or it's recognised by the church not just because they're good at HR but because this is actually part of their vocation, it's part of their *personal* spiritual journey, who have a personal authority as well as an organisational authority, that models ... maybe it's the modelling of ... I'll give you an example, in here ... I've very deliberately brought my Prayer Desk from home, so that it's not just the computer and my desk, it's about saying, 'Here's a model' ... it's on my knees! ... this is the heart of actually who I am, so any strategic leadership that I hope to offer to the church, if that's not underpinned by my relationship with G-d and my sense that the church has recognised in me *some* sort of personal spiritual authority ... and I'm not very good at declaring that in a public context ... 'Here am I am with my personal spiritual authority!' ... but, you know, they've got to go hand in hand. This is probably pre-empting where this is going but how you choose which individuals within the life of the church, others who represent the church in that way, whether to society or back to the church itself, I

think is an interesting question. I don't know. That was a bit rambling, wasn't it!?

Interviewer: No, no, no. I suppose, thinking about people whose names we know, then there are people who have emerged, aren't they, often, and then they perhaps they might fill a particular role within the church, which calls on their gifts, doesn't it, to offer spiritual leadership in that particular role?

Respondent: Yeah. I mean, I think that's right. There's the obvious sort of President and General Secretary roles, which need to hold those sort of visionary and spiritual, perhaps even Episcopal, you could argue, roles of unity and oversight and mission and to be good role models and effective communicators on behalf of the church, again, within itself and beyond itself. But there are also those who, by dint of the books they've written, the profile they have within the life of the church or within the public world are also doing that, whether or not they've been President of Conference and actually we're not always ever so good at using their gifts; we're not very flexible as an organisation, partly because we're so wonderfully democratic. And sometimes it's absolute accident of history or who you know, which I worry about sometimes, in the church, as to whether you're on a particular committee or task group or some of the places, the engine of what helps drive the church; who gets to be in the engine? – who are the cogs?

Interviewer: And how often you speak at Conference.

Respondent: Well, it can be, although some would say that's actually to a very limited audience and although live streaming's made it more interesting and others would say, 'Ah well, it's all reported in the Methodist Recorder' – well, that's going to a continually more limited audience as the subscription rate drop plummets. So I think there's interesting questions about how people have a profile within the life of the church and how many of those who do actively have sought a profile and how many it's just kind of been thrust upon them by circumstance or their skills or whatever. I don't know. I'm not sure we're brilliant at helping those ... you can use this in whatever way ...

... someone like Indijit Bhogal, who really went into the wilderness after being President because actually he thinks in a way that's quite unique for the church and is challenging and it's taken a long time for us to know how to create space ... and in a sense, he's had to go beyond the Methodist church in order to fulfil who he is and what he is and that's a good thing for him and Coranina but actually how possible was it for the church to contain someone with that much vision and what does that say about the church if it isn't able to make

the most of the gifts of someone whose got a really special, unique, prophetic voice for society.

Because I guess part of the problem is that often people with those skills and people in the past, like John Vincent, at one level they've got those prophetic skills, but most prophets are a pain in the backside to live with, so the church doesn't necessarily have prophet shaped spaces within it [laughs] and those of us who are called into leadership in whatever way, are often having to counter the needs of institution - and it is an institution – and the protection of vulnerable people within it, alongside a *burning* desire to change the world and actually there's a real conflict, I think largely within the General Secretary's post, I think that is a huge ... I think the President's got more freedom to go off for a year ... it's then what you do with what they've said and what *they* do with what they've learnt.

Interviewer: Just thinking about presidency then ... a few years ago there was the proposal that it be extended both in terms of people within the presidency and also length of time. Have you got any thoughts on whether that would have been a good idea or not and also what the continuing role of the President might be?

Respondent: I waver really on that and it depends what good argument I've heard recently. I think if the General Secretary's role is actually to be the General Secretary to the Connexional Team and therefore be, in a sense, oriented towards the team and helping them that be the best it can be and the most efficient it can be, then you could get away with a longer presidency, in that the voice that's speaking out from the church is the President's voice.

I think while we've got what we've got, which is a presidential approach to being the General Secretary, with an outward looking orientation, as well as team orientation, I think the potential, in a sense, to have two presidential voices is greater and that could be a risk for the church and certainly a risk for those in those offices and therefore having a one year President makes it easier for whoever's in the General Secretary role to be able to do both.

I think if we got rid of the idea of a General Secretary and just had a Secretary of Conference or even just 'Head of Team' or whatever ... a Connexional Secretary ... a Senior Connectional Secretary ... top dog! ... actually a longer term presidency would make more sense because then that's who the world relates to and there's more sense of being able to have a strategic role in terms of vision. But, again, it can't just be a tour of Britain and the world; it would need to have a strategic element written into it.

Now, at the moment, about to be Presidents, Presidents and those who've been Presidents have significant roles within complaints and discipline, within going and making relationships or repairing relationships or opening up the possibility of relationships with the World Church in different ways, you know, there's ongoing stuff. Some of them, I get the impression, are more or less satisfied with the amount of what they get to do after they've been President. Yeah, I don't know. I think it's complex.

But I actually was on one of the commissions looking at 'leadership in the Methodist church' (not the last one, the one before that) and I wasn't entirely convinced that having a General Secretary and a President was actually the best and most helpful and my worry about extending the presidency is what that does to what we currently call 'Vice President' because in terms of who you could actually invite to take that on for three or five years ... now, does that matter? ... should it matter? ... should they run together? I think they should because, on the whole, the partnership, when it's gone well (which most years it does, by some accident of G-d's grace), that partnership of lay and ordained together is a true partnership and actually if you started altering the timelines and there's a mismatch there, I think that would be much harder to achieve and I think in the end the Vice President would be more sidelined than the possibility of it today.

Interviewer: Whilst we've got a situation where the General Secretary speaks to the church ... and one of the questions I'm asking in congregations is whether anybody knows that the General Secretary speaks to the church? Because in the Methodist Recorder the cry is always for a longer term post, so that the world knows what the Methodist voice is; there's no reflection there on the General Secretary at all in that correspondence ...

Respondent: I think that's right.

Interviewer: ... which I think is either worrying or interesting or both!? [laughs]

Respondent: Yeah, absolutely. If you want top level talks between structural denominations; so when you've got the Head of the URC and the Baptist Union, is it the General Secretary who's invited into that conversation? Well, if it's about anything long term and structural, it *has* to be. Whereas if it's a sort of joint signing of a covenant then you drag in the President and it's interesting about long term relationships with the world and the other churches. Yeah. Um. I haven't resolved it in my head but I know we ain't got it right at the moment.

Interviewer: Just moving on slightly from that point ... we're getting there! ... I think Methodism has on occasions been suspicious of individuals

with power, therefore we like authority residing in Conference (in theory) and so one of the areas of interest, I guess, is the balance between individuals who may be ... and that goes back to the leadership question; spiritual and organisational leadership, people with skills and gifts in those areas and Conference, a mass corporate decision making body and the tensions that there are between those two models within Methodism - which perhaps came to the fore recently maybe over one or two issues at the last Conference - and whether and how we move forward with those two structures together, on the one hand crying out for leadership and on the other not wanting strong leaders sometimes?

Respondent: Yes, we want stronger leaders as long as they're like *us* and lead us the way we want to be led. I have a very high view of Conference and a high regard of Conference, to the extent that a few years ago I was actually sad enough to go through the minutes of Conference and work out how much of the agenda had actually come from the local circuit and the local church and districts and at that time it was about 80%.

Interviewer: 80%?

Respondent: Yeah, which was stunning I thought. I haven't done it since. My suspicion (and it may only be a suspicion) is that ... I mean, there's always going to be a percentage that's about statutory compliance and, 'You've just got to do it and you might not like it and it's going to take up too much of your day but tough' – my concern is that there's a weight ... partly because most of the people who would represent Conference in writing reports and decision making are volunteers and can't necessarily do it, or the people with time to have the bright idea are those who are paid to have bright ideas, that the weight towards the stuff that's come from the Connectional Team or the civil service or the church is perhaps a bigger proportion than it was say 10 or 15 years ago.

Now, that's a *gut* feeling, I can't back that up with hard research but certainly I've sat on a number of committees, including Conference Business committees, where there have been moves towards an increased on block business approach and a sense of needing an increase of control from the centre. Now, some of that is for really good reasons, to do with actually how much business we really think we can get through in what effectively is three and a half days of real business ... there's other stuff, important stuff but what's realistic for that decision making body?

And memorials used to take up a lot of business, of Conference's time, and they're the things that come from districts and circuits. I'd be interested ... you know, as we've controlled them and answered

them centrally more and more and while part of me thinks yes, it's an efficient way of working, part of me rankles against that and says, 'I want to protect ...', that's why I want to keep some Conference elected reps within Conference, who've got an institutional memory but are not part of the institution as such. So yeah, I will fight to keep local voices and representatives being the key people and voices at Conference.

Interviewer: Interesting times. Can we just head towards bishops, to finish with?

Respondent: Oh yes.

Interviewer: And I guess on the one hand the Methodist church has still decided to have bishops at one level and at the other level clearly we haven't ...

Respondent: [Laughs] Yes.

Interviewer: ... so the question really is whether you can see a place for episcopacy within British Methodism or not and if you did, where do you see that residing?

Respondent: I think theologically the most logical place would be superintendents, but that's far too many people. I think Methodism does have bishops, world Methodism has bishops, often ... well, the models vary but the models I'm most aware of are where the bishop is the leader of the church nationally and at the point where they retire, they're called 'bishop' in an honorary sense but essentially someone else comes along and is now the bishop and I think probably it's closer to the General Secretary model and usually involves a lot of admin in that model. I think we're stymied in the UK because psychologically we can't get Anglican bishops out of our heads.

I think episcopacy is a good thing if it's balanced by the church [laughs] and I don't want district chairs to automatically be bishops if we ever said we'd have bishops, even though the world thinks it's the closest model; it's only close because it looks close in size and number to the Anglican ... so you're kind of either going down the General Secretary to the President of Conference ... President of Conference makes a certain amount of sense in terms of ordaining and so you've always got someone who has been a bishop ordaining or been a President ordaining.

I just think psychologically it will take a long time and I'm not sure, whilst we have an established Church of England, that we're ever going to find it palatable because we're just so hung up on that model and if we all looked around the rest of the world we could see different models and they might be more useful - but the UMC model is interesting and that tends to be the Head of Conference - so

if it's the President of Conference, that makes sense but they're doing it not just for a year. So yeah, I'm not answering very clearly but.

Interviewer: That American sort of travelling bishop has a ring, with the presidency ...

Respondent: Yeah, a sense of someone who's there to rally the troops.

Interviewer: ... and is pastorally represented as well.

Respondent: That's right ... smells the new toilet paper and paint wherever they go!

Interviewer: And just finally, any other things that you wanted to say and we've missed about the future of leadership?

Respondent: I think it would be good if we could help new superintendents and some established superintendents to recognise that on the whole, if they want change in the church, they're going to have to be the ones to drive it and to support them in doing that. Now, there are some who think that they've already got the message but are actually so far the other way that they're, you know, dictators, but actually to take initiative about resources and mission and ministry and the church, waiting for someone to tell them when to do it; there is no-one to tell them and I learnt that over the four years that I was in, that if I didn't engage ...

Interviewer: If you didn't do it, nobody else was going to!?

Respondent: ... yeah, if I don't do it, no-one else is! ... but the doing it then is about engaging their leadership colleagues, ecumenical partners and actually being proactive, not just about saying, 'Something needs to be done' but actually setting up the ways of doing it and I think that's probably quite a shock to the system and it took a while for me to realise that I can have all the good ideas before breakfast I want but no-one else is going to do them [laughs] ... so, you know, and I think some supers don't really get their key strategic role in making change happen in the church and we need to get trusteeship up to circuit level - or *across*, I should say, I don't believe in hierarchies; *across*!

Interviewer: [Laughs] Thank you very much.

Respondent: You're welcome. I hope that was helpful.

Interviewer: Yes, thank you.

[End of recorded material]

